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Unfettered Expression and Human Dignity: Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, *The Big Sea* and Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract

In literature as in other disciplines, freedom of speech entails the unburdening of one's intent from the innermost recesses of one's mind. It is a great relief and a ventilation of the conscious and sub-conscious being. Langston Hughes and Chinua Achebe are noted human rights proponents in their American and Nigerian milieus. In *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea*, Hughes effectively voices the African-American people's desire for freedom from racial and socio-economic discriminations. He is forthright and uncompromising in both the autobiographical and fictional texts. Achebe on his part imaginatively depicts a frank and uncompromising journalist who unfathoms the abuses and decay in the Nigerian political machinery, but is brutally murdered in cold blood by the government security officers.

Those who would give essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety'. Speech is bold and resolute – a state of mind in which there is no urge to be secure, no concession to the intimidators, and no fear of the consequences (Murray et al, 1993: 101).

These are Franklin Delano Roosevelt's proclamations on the concept of the *Four Freedoms* which were amplified by Norman Rockwell. These freedoms embrace speech, worship, want and fear. A major question arises as to whether these freedoms could endure time, war and peace? As though in answer, John Frohnmayer argues:

Democracy is never fixed, it is never certain, never secure. Our notions of freedom and justice evolve and thus, were Rockwell to paint today, the speaker might be a woman (instead of a man)* and the crowd certainly would reflect America with all its hues and colours, races and religions. Rockwell might show more ambiguity in the faces of the listeners, or even outright disagreement, since today we have no clearly evil foe such as Hitler, and our world is more complex and baffling (Ibid).

Frohnmayer further observes that:

The concept of free speech means nothing if it protects only that speech with which we agree. Speech is the tool by which we hammer out the clauses in our social contract, generation by generation. We do not reach that consensus by prohibiting those ideas with which we disagree, and thus the answer to offensive or contentious speech is always more – persuasive speech.

If we lose our freedom, it will be because we have let it slip away in small increments. It will die a little when it is too much to go to the school board meeting to challenge well-meaning parents who seek to ban books the school library. It will erode when we scream at our congressional representatives to ban difficult or confrontational art. It will be tarnished when speech codes are accepted on college campuses. Rockwell's speaker is standing up, an act of courage and participation. Speech, like muscle, grows stronger with use and atrophies with inactivity. And while some may say that contentious speech is a price we must pay for a democracy, I believe that both Roosevelt and Rockwell would portray it as democracy's reward (101-102).

Representative characters in major American and Nigerian fictional and non-fictional works manifest a tendency to free speech in their every action. Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea* and Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* effectively mirror this trend

In *Not Without Laughter* also, Harriet's mother, Aunt Hager Williams expresses her thoughts freely. Unlike Harriet, she is not bitter. Instead, she is sweet, loving, caring and very maternal. She voices opinions on crucial issues in her society and, her assistance as a domestic is eagerly sought after by blacks and whites in Stanton, Kansas community. She spices her discussions and opinions with Biblical wisdom and resigns herself completely to God's divine will. She is also tolerant and forgiving of others.

The Big Sea is Langston Hughes's initial autobiography. In it we have Hughes as the champion of free speech. We also have other interesting and vocal personalities like Mary Sampson Patterson (Hughes's grandmother), Carrie Hughes (his mother) and the singer cum entertainer, Florence Embry Jones. Indeed, Hughes not only embodied free speech but also free choice, as ably manifested in his persistent desire to study in the United States whereas his father prefers him to study in Europe:

On the way back to the ranch, my father suddenly announced that he had made up his mind to have me studying mining engineering

... "But I can't be a mining engineer, I'm no good at mathematics",

I said, as we walked to the horses.

"You can learn anything you put your mind to", my father said...

"What do you want to be?"

"I don't know. But I think a writer".

* * *

As we rode, my father outlined a plan he had made up in his mind for me, a plan I had never dreamed of before. He wanted me to go to Switzerland to college, perhaps to Basle, or one of the Cantons. But as a compromise to Switzerland and Germany, I suggested Columbia in New York – mainly because I wanted to see Harlem. My father wouldn't hear of it. But the more I thought of it, the Better I liked the idea myself....so I told my father I'd rather go to Columbia than to Switzerland (Hughes 1940: 61-63).

Indeed, *The Big Sea* revolves around Langston Hughes in his youth and how through free choice and expression he denied himself property, stability and sponsorship and strove relentlessly to make a name for himself in the turbulent American and European societies. Hughes is so eloquent that he guides readers along his chequered road to prominence.

He describes, exposes, narrates and argues as he paints the situation for them. It is so vivid that they are with ecstasy at one point and transported to fanciful periods being depicted like, "When the Negro was in vogue", during the Harlem Renaissance:

The 1920's were the years of Manhattan's Black Renaissance. It began with *Shuffle Along*, *Running Wild*, and the Charleston. Perhaps some people would say even with *The Emperor Jones*, Charles Gilpin, and the tom-toms at the Province town. But certainly it was the musical revue, *Shuffle Along*, that gave a scintillating send-off to that Negro vogue in Manhattan, which reached its peak just before the crash of 1929, *Shuffle Along* was a honey of a show. Swift, bright, funny Rollicking, and gay, with a dozen danceable, singable tunes. Everybody was in the audience – including me. People came back to see it innumerable times. It was always packed. To see *Shuffle Along* was the main reason I wanted to go to Columbia (223-224).

In a nutshell, *The Big Sea* is a conceptualization and expression by Langston Hughes, of experiences in three major continents – North America, Africa and Europe, but especially of the United States. In it we witness what was in vogue in those days. We also witness the great expectations, tumults and world view of people in that milieu. Hughes sums up the early impetus accorded contemporary African-American Literature in that era thus:

In those days, Charles S. Johnson, writer, speaker, and social scientist, was the editor of *Opportunity*. Mr. Johnson, I believe, did more to encourage and develop Negro writers during the 1920's than anyone else in America. He wrote them sympathetic letters, pointing out the merits of their work. He brought them together to meet and know each other. He made the *Opportunity* contests sources of discovery and help. Jessie Fauset at the *Crisis*, Charles Johnson at *Opportunity*, And Alain Locke in Washington, were the three people who midwived the so-called New Negro Literature into being. Kind and critical – but not too critical for the young – they nursed us along until our books were born. Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Botemps, Rudolph

In *Not Without Laughter*, the champion of free speech is Harrietta Williams, Aunt Hager Williams' last child and daughter. She is blatant, outspoken and vehement as she weighs the condition of African-American folks in her racist American milieu. She is black in a society where harsh white racial segregation of coloured people prevails and she voices her opinions bluntly:

'Jimboy's right', said Harriet. 'Darkies do like the church too much, but white folks don't care nothing about it at all. They are too busy getting theirs out of this world, not from God. And I don't blame 'em, except that they are so mean to niggers. They're right, though, looking out for themselves...and yet I hate 'em for it. They don't have to mistreat us besides, do they?'

* * *

They wouldn't have a single one of us around if they could help it. It don't matter to them when they hurt our feelings without caring and treat us like slaves down South and like beggars up North. No, it don't matter to them....White folks run the world, and the only thing coloured folks expected to do is work and grin and take off their hats as though it don't matter...O, I hate 'em!' Harriet cried, so fiercely that Sandy was afraid.

'I hate white folks!' She said to everybody on the porch in the darkness.

'You can pray for 'em if you want to mama, but I hate 'em! ... I hate white folks! I hate 'em all! (Langston Hughes, 1930 (1969 ed.): 82-90).

Harriet is coloured, but intelligent and multi-talented. In school she does well at her studies. She sings very well. She equally dances well: "Harriet had had no raising, even though she was smart and in high school. A female child needed care. But she could sing! Lawdy! And dance, too!" (45-46). However, the ever-present racial discrimination challenges her humanity and informs her response to people, issues and the society. A nasty racial encounter early in her life at school remains memorable and contributes to shaping her character:

Now, because she could sing and dance and was always amusing, many of the white girls in high school were her friends. But when the three-thirty bell rang and it was time to go home, Harriet knew their polite "Good-bye"

was really a kind way of saying: "We can't be seen on the streets with a colored girl" (88).

While viewing an educational movie with her classmates, Harriet is rudely confronted with the harsh racism in her community as she is singled out due to her skin colour and told to sit at the back of the theatre apart from other students despite the pre-allocation of seats to each class. This hurts her a lot and she refuses to obey the racial instructions. She protests, though to no avail. As a mark of her dignity, she quits instead of accepting segregation:

So Harriet rose and stumbled up the dark aisle and out into the sunlight, her slender body hot with embarrassment and rage. The teacher saw her leave the theatre without a word of protest, and none of her classmates defended her for being black. They didn't care (89).

In addition to being a voice for racial equality in the United States, Harriet speaks freely against poverty, the snobbish and condescending attitude of rich folks and illiteracy in general, but particularly among the black folk. She therefore dedicates herself to the task of training her cousin Sandy in order to enable him to achieve Aunt Hager Williams' objective of becoming a leader and spokesperson for the African-American community:

...I can give you that much myself,...and you go to school....This boy's gotta get ahead – all us niggers are too far back in this white man's country to let any brains go to waste! Don't you realize that? ...You and me was foolish all right, breaking mama's heart, leaving school, but Sandy can't do like us. He's gotta be what his grandma Hager wanted him to be – able to help the black race, Annjee! You hear me? Help the whole race! (297-298).

Despite her initial foray into prostitution, Harriet, owing to her dual talents as singer and dancer, becomes a professional "Princess of the Blues"(291). It is with this career that she undertakes to educate Sandy. She also redeems her previous negative image as a call girl who lived in "de bottoms" (41). Thus, she excels in her chosen profession with which she expresses herself freely to the American public.

Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Jean Toomer, Nella Larson, all of us came along about the same time (218).

At Lincoln University, Hughes, even though he was still a new student, became an activist in quest of basic freedoms for his race and for all Americans. He states eloquently that:

I liked Lincoln very much. But just as I like America and still find certain things wrong with it, so I found several things wrong with Lincoln. When I first went there, it had an all-white faculty teaching an all-Negro student body. And, other than the football coach, no Negro had ever, in all its seventy years held a professional position at Lincoln, a college for, as its catalogue states, the training of Negro leaders. There was an unwritten official colour line that said no Negro could teach on that faculty. And no one of its alumni had ever been asked to join the Board of Trustees. How then could they be training Negro leaders? That worried me, for surely out of all the Negro leaders they had trained, someone would be capable of serving in the Board of Trustees of the college, or of coming back to the campus as a teacher (279-280).

Expressions like these reveal the deep humanistic potentialities which catapulted Hughes to the limelight and made him the human rights champion that he subsequently became and remained till his death in 1967.

Ikem Osodi is a meticulous and fearless journalist who believes strongly in Press Freedom. He is the editor of the government owned newspaper, the *National Gazette* in Kangan, a fictitious country. Unfortunately, it is a military dictatorship which represses freedom of expression and gags the Press. Osodi is a committed journalist and he would not be dictated to by government agents. He therefore incurs their wrath by expressing opinions freely. He argues:

Worshipping a dictator is such a pain in the ass. It wouldn't be so bad if it was merely a matter of dancing upside down on your head. With practice anyone could learn to do that. The real problem is having no way of knowing from one day to another, from one minute to the next, just what is up and what is down. (Chinua Achebe 1987:45).

In the end, Osodi is arrested at the dead of night, detained in a moving jeep, tortured and executed for his unfettered expression by agents of the military government. However, his death sets off sparks of instability and insurrection in Kangan which ultimately results in a coup d'état against the prevailing military government.

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, though fictional, is about the evils of military rule in Nigeria. In the society depicted as Kangan, there is travesty of justice, repression of individuals, gagging of the press – indeed, none of the four freedoms so eloquently enunciated by Roosevelt and Rockwell are respected. It is a society completely stained by corruption, mediocrity and an abuse of all basic freedoms and rights.

Although the society in *Anthills* is fictionalized and named Kangan with regions such as Abazon, it is clear from a reading the text that Achebe is analyzing the havoc and travesty of leadership and democracy in Nigeria. Indeed, the situation is so bad that there is betrayal of trust and confidence among colleagues who were once school mates and reliable friends. His Excellency, the military Head of State distances himself from his close friends and school mates Chris Oriko and Ikem Osodi and, through scheming and intrigue humiliates and devastates them, destroying Ikem and making a fugitive out of Chris. His Excellency would rather listen to sycophants than to his genuine confidants. He pursues Chris like a ravenous beast after its quarry. The manner in which his agents arrest and kill Ikem Osodi is blood-curdling. To worsen matters, the government agency which initiated the arrest of the journalist churns lies to the public, accusing Osodi of being the mastermind of a coup d'état against the military dictatorship:

In the discharge of its duty in safeguarding the freedom and security of the state and of every law-abiding citizen of Kangan the State Research Council has uncovered a plot by unpatriotic elements in Kangan working in concert with certain foreign adventurers to destabilize the lawful government of the country.

This dastardly plot was master-minded by Mr. Ikem Osodi until recently Editor of the government-owned *National Gazette*....In the early hours of this morning a team of security officers effected the arrest of Mr. Osodi in his official flat at 202 Kingsway Road in the Government Reservation Area and were taking him in a military vehicle for questioning at the S.R.C. Headquarters when he seized a gun from one of his escorts. In the scuffle that ensued between Mr. Osodi

and his guards in the moving vehicle Mr. Osodi was fatally wounded by gunshot (168-169).

The sole aim of the military government in Kangan in killing the journalist, Ikem Osodi, was to completely gag the otherwise fledgling press in order to stifle free expression among the citizens. However, since the government's motive for killing the journalist was unfounded and borne out fear and speculation, it backfired. The instability resulting from the event quickly turned to insurrection which led to the overthrow of the military government of "His Excellency the President". Apparently, members of His Excellency's ruling military council staged the coup d'état. Thus another set of military rulers took charge of government affairs in Kangan.

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that Hughes's America and Achebe's Kangan (Nigeria) have a long way to go in their bid to effectively foster free speech, in their two societies. Whereas in Hughes' America, white racism of blacks, poverty and ignorance stalls the blossoming of free speech, in Achebe's Nigeria, ruthless military dictatorship and exploitation of people by the ruling elite coupled with ignorance and nonchalance by the citizens retard the growth of unfettered expression.

Nevertheless, there is great potential for free speech in the two societies portrayed. People in both societies are resilient, determined and hardworking. They also manifest a genuine longing for fundamental human freedoms, including free expression. Hughes and Achebe tend to imply that since the seeds of these basic freedoms are already sowed in the people, it is just a matter of time before these societies effectively articulate their desires and aspirations. When that time comes, no government (neither benign nor ruthless), pressure groups or individuals would be able to gag the press or restrict speech among the populace. Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms would therefore need a lot of nurturing and tending in the America and Nigeria portrayed for them to find permanent acceptance. However, since basic ingredients for this nurturing already exist in the two societies, there are prospects for the full attainment of these ideals. Indeed, the United States has made tremendous progress towards the actualisation of these freedoms. The society reflected in Hughes's works is not the same with what obtains today. Even Nigeria with her litany of military dictators has recorded appreciable progress in the march towards the full attainment of Rockwell's basic human freedoms.

In the ideal society envisaged by Norman Rockwell, freedom of speech appears to be paramount among other freedoms. It is so important that it should not be toyed with:

To live free a man must speak openly: gag him and he becomes either servile or full of cankers. Free government is then the most realistic kind of government for it not only assumes that a man has something on his mind, but concedes his right to say it. It permits him to talk – not without fear of contradiction, but without fear of punishment. There can be no people's rule unless there is talk... (Murray and other, 1993:113)

Free speech it turns out is the root of genuine, sustainable democracy:

In those countries the people create their own governments. They make them what they please, and so the people really are the governments. They let anybody stand up and say what he thinks. If they believe he's said something sensible, they vote to do what he suggests. If they think he is foolish they vote no... Speech is the expression of thought and will. Therefore, freedom of speech means freedom of the people. If you prevent them from expressing their will in speech, you have them enchained, an absolute monarchy. Of course nowadays he who chains the people is called a dictator...(126-127).

It is abundantly clear from this brief analysis that Free Speech is an essential ingredient in any modern society which prides itself to be a democracy and which genuinely caters for the needs of its citizens and seeks steady and sure progress for all and sundry in virtually all areas of positive endeavour.

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