

**Subverting Hegemony and Colonial Narratives
in
The Poetry of Muhammad Al-Fayturi and Langston Hughes**

by
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Abstract

This paper critically examines the poetry of Langston Hughes and the Arab African poet Muhammad Al-Fayturi in order to explore areas of common interest which link the black literary tradition in the United States with its counterpart in Africa. Carrying the scars of the double curse of slavery and colonialism, both poets, according to the argument of the paper, developed an oppositional poetics to subvert hegemonic colonial narratives that aimed to degrade their peoples in Africa and the American Diaspora. The paper also points out that the poetic attempts of Hughes and Al-Fayturi to reconstruct black history is integral to a post-colonial aesthetic aiming to dismantle the tradition of submission and alter the traditional image of what blacks were forced to think of themselves along three hundred years of oppression and racism.

In “The Politics of Post Coloniality”, Aijaz Ahmad celebrates the efforts to designate the contemporary literatures of Asia and Africa as post-colonial and thus , to make them available for being read according to the protocols that metropolitan criticism has developed for reading what it calls minority literatures (Ahmad 1997: 282). Taking Ahmad’s argument into consideration, it becomes relevant to combine the poetry of the black minority in America with the postcolonial poetic tradition in Africa in order to explore common areas of interest that characterize the poetry of both sides.

Regardless of minority or postcolonial considerations, blacks in Africa and America are bound to each other by their common color and their tragic legacy of slavery and oppression. They also share a history of suffering and an ancestral memory of agony and pain reflected in their literatures and folklore traditions. In “Black Nationalism Since Garvey”, John Bracey establishes an analogy between the black experience in the United States and the history of the black people in Africa:

The black experience in America can be viewed as similar to the colonial experience of blacks in Africa, the West Indies, and Latin America. The historical process in these areas - colonization, resistance, accommodation, nationalism, decolonization, nationhood - is operable in Black America. The corresponding historical continuum in America, then, is colonialism (slavery), 1619-1865, colonialism (imperialism), 1865-1963, and decolonization, since 1963 (Bracey 1971: 259).

In Rebellion or Revolution, Harold Cruse affirms Bracey’s argument by drawing a link between the circumstances of Africans under western colonization and the black experience of racism and slavery in America. In his discussion of what he calls the state of “domestic colonization” (77) of blacks in America, Cruse argues:

It is not at all remarkable then that the semi-colonial status of the Negro has given rise to nationalist movements. It could be surprising if it had not (Cruse 1968: 77).

The similarity between the African and the Afro American experience of racism, slavery and colonization leads to the emergence of black nationalist movements which have their roots in African and American history:

Black nationalism has deep roots in American history. Black nationalism as a body of ideas and a pattern of behavior stemming logically from the colonial relationship of Black America to White America is both a response to colonial subordination and an affirmation of the existence of an alternative nationality and set of values (Bracey 1971: 259).

The complexities and intensities of the history of race relations and colonization in Black America (a domestic colony), and in Africa gave rise to a literature of anger and protest which manifested itself in the poetic works of Langston Hughes and the black Sudanese poet Muhammad Al-Fayturi¹. 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, Eliseo 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). 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, Jacques 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).

In the beginning of his career Hughes not only writes revolutionary poetry but also embodies the emerging spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. In his poetry, he expresses the rising black consciousness and racial pride dismantling the tradition of submission and undermining the traditional image of what blacks were forced to think of themselves along three hundred years of oppression. Apparently, Hughes's Harlem Renaissance poetry not only condemns white oppression but also refutes racist colonial 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.

Further, Al-Fayturi and Hughes reconstruct the experience of Africans and black Americans through a poetics of anger, which aims to reveal 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 potential location of the black/white conflict in the New World, he addresses the big city in a lamentative tone:

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 people (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 441²).

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 Afro-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.).

In 1964, Al-Fayturi expressed his sympathy with the struggle of the black people in America in a poem entitled “To Paul Robeson, the singer. In the poem, Al-Fayturi depicts Paul Robeson, the black American singer who was brutalized by the American government due to his ideological doctrine, as a mythic hero. Targeting the advocates of racism and apartheid in America, Al-Fayturi explains the reasons for the campaign against Robeson: "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 1960’s, Al-Fayturi says:

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 immortalizes the Afro-American singer because he used his songs as a weapon in the black struggle for freedom and equality. As a revolutionary epics challenging the massacres of black people in the 1960’s. Robeson's songs participated in the awakening of black consciousness and ethnic pride. In spite of racist brutality, the songs of Robeson infuses new spirit in the black 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 expressing his admiration of the songs of Paul Robeson, 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 tells Paul Robeson that in order to live in America, he has to

glorify your assassins
cut off the breasts of your mother
and play with the bones of your father (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 black 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).

Coming under the influence of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and other Afro-American writers, Al-Fayturi expresses his sympathy toward the Afro-American people. Being aware of the catastrophic history of the black people in the New World, Al-Fayturi, in “The Incident” 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
after the earth became flowing
with our moans, lamentations and wounds (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 74).

Al-Fayturi is concerned with the issue of slavery because he thinks that slavery, like the holocaust, is one of the most painful experiences in the entire human history. In African Songs, cited above, Al-Fayturi does not aim to attack individuals but he revolts against what Amiri Baraka calls “three hundred years of oppression”. In Amiri Baraka’s drama, The Slave, Bradford Easley, a white character, criticizes his opponent, Walker Vessel, the black protagonist and an ex-slave, accusing him of reverse racism: “Walker

you were preaching the murder of all white people” (72). In return Walker replies by affirming that he does not attack the white people but he only denounces those who advocate slavery: “I was crying against three hundred years of oppression not against individuals” (Baraka 1964: 72). In her discussion of the slavery issue, Michele Wallace argues that slavery has caused great disasters to the black people on the social, economic, psychological and moral levels:

American slavery was a dehumanizing experience for everyone involved. Both black men and women were forced to labor without compensation, to live in an environment totally controlled by their owners. They were compelled to accept the plantation system and the relentless deculturalization process that eventually rid them of their African origin. The slave family was constantly subject to disruption by sales of children, of father and mother. Black women did have sex with and bear children for their white masters (Wallace 1979: 17).

Recalling era of slavery, the slave poet, George Moses Horton, in a tone of sadness and despair laments his destiny as a slave who fails to purchase his freedom in America after losing his homeland in Africa: “Alas! and am I born for this / to wear this, slavish chain?/ deprived of all created bless / through hardship, toil and pain” (cited in Gibson 1973: 14). Being cut off from his ethnic roots in Africa, Horton is destined to live as a slave in American territories where he suffers from “hardship, toil and pain”. Life in the American South during the slavery era reinforced in the black people feelings of shame and repulsion about their racial origins afflicting all kinds of torture on them. According to Francis Foster, blacks in Southern plantations were

suspended for hours by their hands above ground, placed in barrels into which nails had been driven and rolled down hills, branded with hot irons and disfigured by the removal of fingers, ears and eyes. Some are forced to drink injurious solutions or eat worms, others were chained to each other or to weights and forced to do their full share of work (Foster 1979: 16).

As the nineteenth century came to an end, the position of the black people in America was steadily deteriorating because apartheid was advocated everywhere and blacks were denied freedom of expression. Although blacks were also subjected to oppression in the beginning of the twentieth century they participated in the First World War, lured by the promise of democracy and freedom. After the end of the war, more oppressive measures were taken to prevent blacks from moving toward the American North. However, it was difficult to stop the black people from achieving their dream of equality because they witnessed the ferocity with which other people fought during First World War for the sake of freedom. This was the condition of the black people when Hughes started his literary career during the Harlem Renaissance. According to Nathan Huggins, the Harlem Renaissance has become “a phenomenon marking something more than the fact that Afro-Americans wrote poems and stories. Rather, it symbolizes black liberation and sophistication - the formal shaking off the residual of slavery, in the mind,

spirit and character” (Huggins 1971: 4). In the 1920’s, blacks came to Harlem, drawn by the fascination of the city, which became no longer “the bitter, violent and abandoned slum” according to Gerald Moore but “it was the first black metropolis of the modern world, the great forge for the fashioning of new black culture” (Moore 1969: 74). In Daggers and Javelins, Amiri Baraka argues that in Harlem, the capital of black migration from South to North, Hughes witnessed a “whole society, and the growth of black people within that society” after struggling loose from slavery and grasped at reconstruction and resisted and outlasted the period of reaction at the end of the nineteenth century” (Baraka 1984: 151).

During the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes insists on affirming black identity denouncing black writers who imitate white cultural paradigms. He urges black writers to write as blacks not as Americans and not to “run spiritually from” their race. In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, which is considered as a kind of manifesto for the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes advises the black writers of the Harlem Renaissance to resist the “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour radical individuality into the mold of American standardization and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (cited in Gohar 2001: 93). Hughes also points out that the black poet who wants to ignore his identity and write like a white poet, has to accept the white world’s definition of black people as ugly and inferior. Hughes considered the tendency of some black poets to write within the canonical criteria advocated by the white world as “the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America” observing that blacks have maintained their ethnic distinction therefore,

we younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not it doesn’t matter (cited in Gohar 2001: 94).

As the poet laureate of black people in America in the post WWI era, Hughes also reveals commitments to literary black forms as a basis for his poetry. In his non-ideological way, Hughes develops artistic forms reflecting the reality of black life in America placing the black ghetto in the center of his poetic universe. Turning the urban slums into focus and setting of his poetics, Hughes transforms the black city in America, according to Mariann Russell into “an instrument of group definitions and a symbol of Afro-American twentieth century experience” (Russell 1988: 31). During the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes transforms black mythology and culture into poetic statements playing a pioneering role in awakening the ethnic consciousness of black people linking them with their racial roots in Africa. In his introduction to Modern Black Poets, Donald Gibson discusses the distinctive features of Hughes’s poetry which is dedicated to the life of his folks in the black communities in America:

Hughes differed from most of his predecessors in that he addressed his poetry to the people, specifically to black people. During the twenties when most American poets were turning inward, writing obscure and esoteric poetry to an ever-decreasing audience of readers, Hughes was turning outward, using language and themes, attitudes and ideas familiar

to anyone who had the ability simply to read. He has been a poet of the people. He often employs dialect distinctive of the black urban dweller or the rural black peasant. Throughout his career, he was aware of injustice and oppression and used his poetry as a means of opposing or mitigating them (Gibson 1973: 7).

Writing his poetry to the dwellers of the black ghettos, Hughes was inspired by black folk songs and blues which could be traced back to his African ancestry. Witnessing the movement of jazz and blues from the lower Mississippi region up toward the North to settle in Chicago and New York, Hughes regards them as a paradigm of the black experience. In Shadow and Act Ralph Ellison points out that Hughes was attracted to the blues as a symbol of life's agonies and the potential of challenging them:

The blues impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to figure its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal tragedy expressed lyrically (Ellison 1964: 78).

As the poet of the people, Hughes reads his poems, accompanied by music, directly to black communities because Hughes according to Allen Prowle believes that a poem only exists as a text to be sung, chanted and intoned against a carefully described musical background" (Prowle 1969: 83). Thus Hughes's style of poetry was indicative not only of the artistic climate that was emerging in the 1920's but also of the social climate during that epoch. This makes Hughes's poetry a significant art because it becomes "a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time" (Baraka 1963: 137). By transforming black songs which grow out of the plantation experience in the South during the slave era into a revolutionary poetics dealing with the aspirations of the New Negro, Hughes aims to subvert American racist myths which degrade black culture and history. Unlike Al-Fayturi who was involved in the depiction of the consequences of slavery and colonization in Africa, Hughes devoted his poetry to explore the pains and ambitions of the black people in America in the post WWI era. In other words, Hughes devoted 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 wore 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, 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, 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. It is also an indication of black existence and cultural peculiarities.

In “The Limitations of Universal Critical Criteria”, Ibe Nwoga argues that in African literary traditions,

a greater emphasis [is placed] on community than on persons. Where the individual – character in a novel, persona/poet in poetry – is emphasized the dimensions of his individuality are undercut by the fact that he is a representative, a paradigm of status of being which extends through the community (Nwoga 1976: 14).

As an African poet, dedicated to the struggle of the African people against hegemonic forces which seek to undermine their revolutionary potential, Al-Fayturi, like Hughes, gives priority to communal issues denouncing apartheid policies, which aim to degrade

his folks. Being the first poet who speaks about Africa in Arabic, Al-Fayturi explores the pains and sorrows of the poor African masses, therefore, he gains his reputation as the poet of the people. In “Sorrows of the Black City” Al-Fayturi reconstructs the history of his people evoking the painful memories of a colonial African past:

When the night sets up its trellis of wigs
on the city streets
and sprinkled its deep sorrow on them
when its spiral stairs
take creatures downwards
to a deep remote past
and when its amber shores
are drowned in memories
almost never to awake (Boullata 1979: 88)

In these ancient years and as a result of colonial interference “the blood of tranquility becomes as dry as tombs” and “the heart of the city becomes/like a despicable thing/like Africa in the dark ages” (88). According to Al-Fayturi, colonization and slavery turned Africa into a medieval continent. However, in the pre-colonial era, Africa is viewed as:

An old woman shrouded in incense
a pit for bonfire
an amulet with an ancient prayer
a dance of naked blacks
singing in black joy
in absence of sins (Boullata 1976: 89).

This state of simplicity does not last forever and the era of African innocence comes to an end due to colonial threats and the greed of the colonizers. During the colonial era, Africans are turned into targets for “the master’s lust” and become objects for the economics of slavery:

Ships laden with comely slave girls
musk, ivory and saffron
gifts without festivities
driven by the wind at every moment
to the white man of this age
master of every age (Boullata 1976: 89).

Further, Al-Fayturi describes the experience of the dispossessed Africans in the American plantations after being transported in slave ships to an alien land:

A plantation extends in the world of imagination
clothing the naked, undressing the nude
its gloom running in the veins of life
coloring the waters dyeing the face of God

its sorrows being a laugh on the lips
growing even tyrants
even slaves
even iron
even fetters
growing something new every day (Boullata 1976: 89).

In his poetry, Al-Fayturi excoriated the slave trade featuring horrible stories of enslaved people being driven toward the slave ships, which carried them from the shores of Africa to no man's land. In "Song of Exile", the poet depicts the African slaves at the moment of being transported onboard a slave ship going to an unknown destination. Using the tearful chants of the slave chorus as an objective correlative to convey the painful experience of slavery, he says:

Our hands and feet are bleeding
but we will keep walking
like the water in the rivers
like the sun in the horizon
like the African sands
farewell Africa
farewell Africa, my broken spear
my deserted cottage
my battered face (Complete Works, Vol. II 1979: 184).

Al-Fayturi expresses his disgust with slavery as an evil, irrational and immoral institution that degraded the white masters and violated the national ideals of Africa. In "The Story", Al-Fayturi describes the vicious conflict between European pirates and slave traders over the possession of African slaves:

The thieves have stormed
across the harbor mole
they have broken the ship's mast
and plundered its precious cargo (Jayyusi 1987: 220).

Al-Fayturi also denounces slavery and white supremacist attitudes toward the African people and their religions. He also dismisses the racist attitudes toward Africans which categorize them as inferior and contemptible beings that must be colonized and tortured with impunity:

They came closer toward me
they hanged their crosses
on my neck
I became embarrassed
I did not know the difference
between crime and revolution
it was painful

to conceive what has happened
they were throwing the face of God
with their shoes and knives (Complete Works, Vol. II 1979: 66).

Further, in “To a White Face”, Al-Fayturi discusses the issues of slavery and racism condemning all forms of discrimination:

Because my face is black
and your face is white
you called me a slave
and crushed my humanity
and humiliated me
because my face is black
you put me in chains
and robbed me of everything
even my graves (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 84).

In an interview with Kimberly Benston, Amiri Baraka denounces slavery arguing that slavery is an evil everywhere but in America, there is slavery and racism:

Slavery is dehumanizing whether it is slavery practiced by blacks against blacks, by whites against whites, or whatever. The one added fact in the United States was racism, which did not exist with black versus black or white versus white slavery, a fact created by capitalism. The people who try to make African slavery some kind of paradise are out of their minds – slavery is slavery (Benston 1978: 313).

Like Baraka, Al-Fayturi refers to the heinous consequences of slavery and racism which pave the way for the exploitation of the black people socially and economically:

Because my face is black
you stole my harvest
and left nothing except
my hate and grudge
because my face is black
you stripped me of my clothes and left me naked
in the cottage of darkness (Completed Works, Volume I 1979: 85).

Nevertheless, Al-Fayturi, and in spite of his suffering from the consequences of slavery, is looking forward to a better future based on mutual respect between the ex-slaves and the ex-masters:

Today I am not a slave anymore
so it is time you take off your
masks of arrogance
let us work together hand in hand

to build love and compassion between us
we are brothers
do not cultivate my land
with thorns and hatred
since I have put the seeds
of roses in my land (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 88).

To express the crux of his poetics, Al-Fayturi attempts to sketch out an aesthetic whereby it is easy to see African poetry in its proper context as an expression both African and black. Being aware that his African culture has been violently shattered by slavery and colonization, Al-Fayturi revives significant episodes from African history bringing into the foreground not only the glories of the African ancestors but also the sacrifices of contemporary African leaders. The process of bringing the African history of pain and suffering into the foreground involves a revival of scenes not only of oppression and genocide but also of resistance and victory:

Africa is my land
profaned by the white man
Africa is my land
contaminated by the colonizer
I will die a martyr
for the sake of Africa
my children will sacrifice
their blood for the sake of Africa (Complete Works, Vol. II 1979: 81).

Being aware of the crippling impact of European occupation of African countries, the poet is determined to sacrifice his blood for the sake of Africa in order to liberate his homeland from colonization. In The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon discusses the tragic consequences of colonization on the psyche of the colonized:

Colonial domination is made possible by the negation of national reality by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power, by the banishment of the native and their customs to outlying districts by colonial society, by expropriation, and by the systematic enslaving of men and women (Fanon 1967: 123).

Recalling the history of oppression and tyranny in Africa, Al-Fayturi underlines the damaging impact of colonization and slavery on the African people. He argues that colonization and slavery aimed to erase the African identity and keep the African people silent and subjugated:

When I was young
I saw the white man
turning my brothers into slaves,
slaves walking in chains
the white man behind them

slashing their naked bodies with whips
white whips sticking to black skin and wounds
I am still hearing their cries
I am still seeing the bloody sweat
covering their foreheads
and the hostile white sun
burning their skins and the
grass under their feet (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 69).

In the preceding lines, Al-Fayturi captures the crippling impact of colonization and slavery on the psyche of the African people. As a witness of British and French colonization of African countries, Al-Fayturi devotes his poetry to defend the colonized people in Africa. His obsession with the consequences of colonization leads to critical misinterpretation of his poetry. In his study of contemporary Sudanese poetry, Mustafa Haddara points out that Al-Fayturi's poetry is dominated by a kind of neurosis and "self hatred that can be traced to an inferiority complex originated in his sense of alienation as a black subaltern living in Diaspora" (Haddara 1972: 387). Haddara's notion which integrates Al-Fayturi's self-hatred into a color inferiority complex is refuted by Frantz Fanon who attributes the poet's dilemma to psychological factors rooted in his encounter with colonization and racism. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon refers to the self-division and self-combative nature of the colonial encounter:

With the exception of a few misfits within the closed environment, we can say that every neurosis, every abnormal manifestation is the product of his [the colonized] cultural situation (Fanon 1986: 152).

Neurosis and self-division, according to Fanon are part of the psychological effects of colonization on the colonized subjects. Al-Fayturi's poetry which is considered by Haddara as a manifestation of self-hatred and division is partly the result of the psychological impact of colonization on the colonized self. Haddara's argument is also subverted by Albert Memmi who affirms that self-hatred on the part of the colonized writer in Africa is not related to any inferiority or color complex but it constitutes a step in the writer's development toward the revolutionary stage of his/her career. In The Colonized and the Colonizer, Memmi refers to the way in which the colonial subaltern, prior to his shift "on to the stage of revolt" passes through a phase of self-division and self-hate (Memmi 1979: 14). Therefore, in his revolutionary poetry, Al-Fayturi does not adopt the attitude of the ego-driven category of many post colonial poets but he turns his attention away from the personal toward the social and collective. Struggling to express an authentic personality that confronts a hegemonic post-colonial world, Al-Fayturi prefers to advocate a revolutionary voice standing for the entire African community. He denounces colonization considering it as the major reason for African catastrophes.

Therefore, in his poetry Al-Fayturi resists colonial hegemony denouncing the destructive impact of slavery and colonization on the psyche of the African people. He makes Africa the locus of his poetry according to Mustafa Haddara:

His destiny and existence are related to Africa. He thinks as an African and he breathes as an African making the African continent the center of his poetry. Therefore, the African spirit is manifested in all the titles of his poetic collections (Haddara 1972: 382).

Therefore, Al-Fayturi calls for a poetics that explores spaces such as the trauma of slavery and colonization that exists in African memories and still survives in African culture in the post-colonial era. This revival of memories would apparently free the African people from the complexes of the past and the cycles of race and remorse on this basis Al-Fayturi addresses his ancestors, the victims of colonization and slavery:

O my ancestors
history will bow in respect
to Africa
the rivers of light will flow
into the new African dawn
removing the wall of darkness
O, my ancestors
can you hear the melodies
of victory ?
the dark ages are falling down
the oppressor is disappearing
in fear and awe (Completed Works, Volume I 1979: 82).

As a record of the turbulent African experience of slavery and colonization, Al-Fayturi's poetry provides a wide perspective on African history illuminating areas of controversy about the relationship between Africa and the western world:

The white man has enslaved me
and occupied my land
he wants to keep me as a slave
at present and in the future
as he did in the past
he wants me to spend all my life
in a prison which I built
by my own hands (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 75).

Using his poetry as a dynamics for exploring the painful experience of African people, Al-Fayturi denounces the brutalization of his folks at the hands of the European colonizers and slave traders. In African Songs, he describes the persecution and slaughter of the black people in Africa during the era of slavery and colonization. The poet laments the systematic genocide of the colonized Africans while the entire world is watching the massacre:

He died, not a drop of rain grieved for him
not even a face or two frowned for him

he died tomorrow
a filthy corpse
neglected shroud
he died
his soul darkened and burnt,
full of a history smeared with the blood
from the dangling nooses,
the screams of rebels in the barred prisons (Asfour 1988: 104).

Denouncing what Hayden White refers to as “a fictive or mythic deformation of reality” (White 1987: 76), Al-Fayturi’s assessment of the African experience during the colonial era incorporates narratives of persecution and resistance, of oppression and revolution. As a historical narrative of the African experience, Al-Fayturi’s poetry encounters the tragic consequences of slavery and colonization revealing their impact on the African memory of pain and agony. Condemning the indifference of the world toward the plight of the African people and denouncing a mercantile European civilization which failed to confront the problems created by slavery and colonization in Africa, Al-Fayturi says:

Because sadness is a cold fire
creeping into hearts made up of frost
Africa remained in slavery
when Africa gets rid of one fetter
she is forced to wear another
Africa moves in chains
because weakness is a prison
and fear is a prison
and the dark past is a prison
Africa remained in slavery
moving from prison into prison (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 50).

In “He Died Tomorrow”, and through a dialogue between father and son, Al-Fayturi recalls episodes from African history reminding the readers of the atrocities committed by the European invaders against the colonized people of Africa:

And you, my father
won’t you be back before winter?
all of us are crying still
and clamoring
my mother, my brothers and I
morning and evening
come back (Asfour 1988: 105).

Nevertheless, the father does not come back alive but he returns as a dead body after being killed by the colonizers:

They knocked on the door one night and entered
they threw his corpse by the wall (105)

In African Songs, Al-Fayturi also denounces the brutality of colonization depicting western invaders as they infiltrate into Africa where they create chaos and catastrophes. Instead of an involvement in sentimentality and remorse, Al-Fayturi captures an image of Africa fighting against oppression and colonization:

The African dawn is removing
the wall of darkness
it is time to listen to the songs
of victory
the era of darkness
is fading away
my people in Africa
are regaining their consciousness (Complete Works: Volume I 1979: 48).

In this context, the victimization of the African subjects is overcome by transforming his poetry into a revolutionary dynamics enhancing the values of struggle and resistance. Therefore, Al-Fayturi is able to prevail over the crippling impact of European imperialism on the psyche of the African people. In "To a White Face" he is engaged in a dialogue with his oppressor which reflects a spirit of reconciliation and tolerance:

Let us shake hands
Let us lay the foundation of love
I am your brother
do not betray my love (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 88).

Revealing the failure of European civilization to be engaged with a colonial and post-colonial Africa, Al-Fayturi in his poem "The Black Flood" embodies the western attitude toward Africa in the era of colonization. The white persona in the poem is determined to go to Africa not for human or missionary purposes but for purchasing a cargo of "black gold":

When I get money
I will buy a boat and some dogs
I will sail to Africa to hunt
I will have a caravan of slaves (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 90).

The white slave trader is not only motivated by his interest in achieving material profit but there are other motives:

I am fond of black bodies
I am dying for the warm body
of a female African slave
my folks said that the bodies

of black slaves have a different taste
a different smell
Africa is the land of treasures
the land of naked slaves
Africa
I will come to you one day
as an invader, a colonizer
looking for wealth and life (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 91).

In his African poetry, Al-Fayturi establishes a link between western capitalism on one hand and slavery and colonization on the other emphasizing Frantz Fanon's argument in The Wretched of the Earth, that “colonialism was an inevitable stage in the development of capitalism” (Fanon 1967: 313). Therefore, the process of decolonization, according to Fanon, involves a confrontation between the colonizers and the wretched of the earth. This conflict, in turn, involves an attempt by the colonized to achieve psychological deliverance from the complexes fostered by colonization. In African Songs, Al-Fayturi emphasizes the inevitability of this deliverance:

Even if the forests of Africa
are dominated by silence
a new morning will break up
and the hills of Africa
will burst into fire and flames (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 71).

In his poetry, Al-Fayturi also denounces Europe and its exploitative technology undermining the cultural paradigms of the mercantile European civilization. Questioning the colonial representation of Africa in western culture as a pre-historic continent, Al-Fayturi affirms the civilized roots of the African people mythologizing local history and glorifying Africa. In African Songs, Al-Fayturi brings to the foreground the greatness of African culture calling for the unity of black people all over the world and urging them to resist all forms of hegemony that aim to keep them inferior and subjugated:

My brothers in the East
my brothers all over the world
my brothers in every country
I am calling you
do you know who am I?
I am the one who tore away
the shrouds of darkness
I have destroyed the walls of weakness
I got rid of my chains forever (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 73).

Unlike other post-colonial poets, Al-Fayturi writes poetry which projects narratives that prioritize the consequences of the trauma of colonial hegemony ignoring confrontations with western literary canons. Nevertheless, he challenges western epistemology exploring

the relationship between Africa and the west within the context of the civilizational conflict between colonized and colonizer:

Here, behind this wall
which is painted with our miseries
the white man sleeps in comfort
in a cottage whose ceiling
is made up of the bones
of our forefathers (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 70).

In spite of its commitments to the African motif, Al-Fayturi's poetry is not an example of ethnic chauvinism but a reflection of what Partha Chatterjee identifies as "good nationalism" (Spinkler 1992: 215):

My African people are waking up
from their trance
the black flood is sweeping
our land
crossing over the stone barriers
and great Africa is being born
Africa is twinkling in the rays
of the new dawn (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 83).

In "The African Flood", Al-Fayturi glorifies the sacrifice of the black people in Africa emphasizing their heroism during the era of oppression. Regardless of torture and pain, the African subaltern is able to challenge the European colonizers:

Even when Africa was still in chains
even when Africa was still a big prison
the land of the gallows and death
he was dedicated to revolution
like his rebellious forefathers
he refused to be a slave
even when every inch of his skin
was enflamed by the whips
of the colonizer
he died only after tearing
the colonizer's skull
into pieces (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 94).

In African Songs, Al-Fayturi also celebrates the liberation of the black people from colonization and slavery: "Millions of blacks woke up from their forgotten history / after ages of life in Diaspora" (Volume I 1979: 75). He addresses the black people all over the world expressing his pride in the achievements of the black race in an era of liberation:

My brothers
the black man is transformed into a god
he is not a slave anymore
he is no longer the oppressed slave
licking the shoes of the white master
the stigma of slavery is removed (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 75).

Glorifying Africa, Al-Fayturi attempts to criticize a literature which seeks to abuse and denigrate the sacrifices of the African people during the era of slavery and colonization. He also condemns the policy of systematic interpretive betrayal advocated by those who attempt to ignore the reality of the Africa experience of pain. Further, he affirms the African spirit of protest and revolt against African colonizers and invaders.

The land of Africa survives
through our blood
the land of Africa
echoes the cries
of my ancestors
I vow that the African wind
will disperse the ashes
of the executioner's body (Complete Works, Volume I 1979: 81).

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 white 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).

Carrying the scars of slavery and reflecting the pains and aspirations of their people, Al-Fayturi and Hughes develop an oppositional poetics to disrupt colonial narratives and exhibit the ugly face of oppression and racism. While Hughes's treatment of the issue of oppression is articulated without rage or lamentation, Al-Fayturi reveals anger toward colonial violence using a revolutionary dynamics to uproot colonial paradigms and affirm the poet's aesthetic of resistance and revolt:

My people have walked on thorns for ages
my people have irrigated the land of Africa
with their blood
but they gained nothing
except fire and thorns (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 159).

As victims of the double curse of slavery and colonization, Al-Fayturi and Hughes express their indictment of all forms of oppression and hegemony. Thus, in their poetry, they are engaged in the complex process of reworking the relationship between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed. Dedicating their poetry to their people, both of them are involved in the process of deconstructing the history of slavery and racism in Africa and America giving priority to the painful experience of the black people and engaging significant issues integral to the African Diaspora.

Notes:

¹Al-Fayturi was born in 1930, 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 African Songs, Lover From Africa, African Sorrows and Remember Me Africa.

²All 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.

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