

**HUGHES' ENGAGEMENT WITH FOLKLORE AND ORAL TRADITION****\*Roopa Shrinivas**

Assistant Professor of English, Govt. First Grade College for Women, Gadag.

**Abstract:**

This study explores the Hughes' Engagement with Folklore and Oral Tradition. Langston Hughes' engagement with folklore and oral tradition was a cornerstone of his literary artistry, profoundly shaping his portrayal of African American life and culture. Hughes, a seminal figure in the Harlem Renaissance, adeptly wove elements of African American folklore into his poetry, prose, and plays, utilizing these traditions to reflect and celebrate the lived experiences of Black Americans. His innovative use of vernacular language and dialect not only captured the authentic voice of African Americans but also served to challenge prevailing literary conventions and elevate Black linguistic heritage. Central to Hughes' work was his incorporation of folkloric themes and characters, such as the trickster figure and traditional proverbs, which he used to explore social and racial issues with humor and insight. By blending these elements with contemporary themes, Hughes addressed the complexities of African American identity and resistance, providing a nuanced critique of social injustices. Music, particularly blues and jazz, also played a significant role in Hughes' literary output, reflecting his deep appreciation for these oral traditions. His poetry often mirrored the rhythmic and melodic qualities of these musical forms, creating a rich, evocative style that connected literary expression to the cultural practices of the African American community.

Furthermore, Hughes' engagement with oral history allowed him to capture and preserve the narratives of ordinary Black individuals, emphasizing the communal and historical dimensions of storytelling. His revitalization of African myths and traditions demonstrated a commitment to linking African American cultural expressions with their African roots. Overall, Hughes' work exemplifies how folklore and oral tradition can be harnessed to create a powerful and authentic literary voice. His integration of these elements not only celebrated African American culture but also contributed to a broader understanding of its significance in American literature.

**Keywords:** Hughes, Engagement, Folklore and Oral Tradition.**INTRODUCTION:**

Langston Hughes, a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, was a pioneering poet, novelist, and playwright who profoundly influenced American literature and culture. Born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes grew up in a diverse array of locales, including Kansas, Illinois, and Ohio, which exposed him to a broad spectrum of American experiences. His literary career began in the 1920s, during a period of intense cultural and artistic flourishing in Harlem, New York, where he became a key voice of the era. Hughes is renowned for his use of vernacular language and incorporation of African American musical forms such as blues and jazz into his writing, creating a distinctive and authentic voice. His

work celebrates the richness of Black culture, highlighting themes of racial pride, social justice, and the resilience of the human spirit. Through his poetry, short stories, essays, and plays, Hughes illuminated the struggles and triumphs of African Americans, advocating for their rights and recognizing their cultural contributions.

His notable works include "The Weary Blues," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and "A Raisin in the Sun," which collectively demonstrate his innovative approach to blending traditional African American oral traditions with contemporary literary forms. Hughes' legacy endures as a testament to the power of literature to capture and reflect the experiences of marginalized communities, making him a celebrated figure in American literary history.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:**

This study explores the Hughes' Engagement with Folklore and Oral Tradition.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

### **HUGHES' ENGAGEMENT WITH FOLKLORE AND ORAL TRADITION**

Langston Hughes' engagement with folklore and oral tradition was a central element of his literary work, providing a rich and authentic representation of African American culture and experiences. Hughes, a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance, harnessed these elements to craft a distinctive voice that both celebrated Black heritage and addressed the socio-political realities faced by African Americans. His approach to incorporating folklore and oral traditions can be understood through several key aspects.

#### **Use of Dialect and Vernacular Language**

Langston Hughes' use of dialect and vernacular language was a deliberate and powerful choice that served multiple functions in his literary work. Hughes recognized that the language spoken by African Americans, with its unique rhythms, slang, and phonetic qualities, was an essential aspect of Black identity and culture. By employing this vernacular, Hughes aimed to present a more authentic and relatable portrayal of Black life, bridging the gap between the lived experiences of African Americans and the broader literary world. Hughes' poetry and prose are marked by a keen attention to the musicality and cadence of African American speech. For example, in his poem "The Weary Blues," Hughes mirrors the rhythmic and melodic qualities of blues music, a genre deeply rooted in African American oral traditions. The poem's structure and language mimic the performance of a blues singer, capturing the emotional depth and resilience of the genre. This stylistic choice not only reflects the oral traditions from which blues music originated but also serves to elevate these traditions within the literary canon.

In addition to enhancing the authenticity of his work, Hughes' use of vernacular language functioned as a form of resistance against the dominant literary norms that often marginalized or misrepresented Black voices. By writing in a language that was true to the experiences of

African Americans, Hughes asserted the value of Black cultural expressions and challenged the notion that literary merit required conforming to mainstream standards. His poetry thus became a vehicle for celebrating the richness of African American vernacular and asserting its place within the literary tradition. Moreover, Hughes' incorporation of vernacular language allowed him to engage directly with his audience, creating a sense of intimacy and immediacy. The use of everyday speech in his work made his writing accessible to a broad readership, including those within the African American community who recognized their own experiences and expressions reflected in his words. This connection between Hughes and his readers reinforced the communal aspect of storytelling and highlighted the importance of preserving and valuing Black linguistic heritage.

### **Incorporation of Folkloric Themes and Characters**

Langston Hughes' literary work is deeply infused with African American folkloric themes and characters, reflecting his appreciation for the rich oral traditions of Black culture. By integrating these elements into his writing, Hughes was able to explore and celebrate the complexities of African American life, while also engaging with broader themes of resistance, resilience, and identity. One of the most notable aspects of Hughes' use of folklore is his incorporation of the trickster figure, a common character in African and African American folklore. The trickster, often characterized by wit, cunning, and a subversive nature, serves as a symbol of resistance against oppressive forces. In Hughes' work, characters such as Jesse B. Semple, or "Simple," embody the trickster archetype, using humor and satire to critique societal injustices and navigate the challenges of daily life.

Through *Simple*, Hughes explores themes of social inequality, racial discrimination, and economic hardship, presenting these issues with a blend of humor and sharp social commentary. Simple's experiences and observations reflect the resilience and ingenuity of African Americans in the face of adversity, highlighting the ways in which folklore can serve as a tool for both entertainment and critique. Hughes' engagement with folkloric themes also extends to the use of traditional African American proverbs and oral narratives. These elements provide a framework for exploring cultural values, communal wisdom, and historical experiences. By incorporating proverbs and oral stories into his writing, Hughes not only preserved these cultural expressions but also elevated them within the literary sphere, ensuring that the voices of ordinary Black people were recognized and valued.

In his collection "The Ways of White Folks," Hughes presents a series of short stories that draw upon African American folklore and oral traditions to address issues of racial and social injustice. The stories often feature characters and scenarios that reflect the complexities of Black life, using folkloric elements to illuminate the broader social context. Through this approach, Hughes demonstrates how folklore can be a powerful tool for exploring and critiquing societal norms and power structures.

### **Celebration of Music as Oral Tradition**

Langston Hughes' celebration of music as an oral tradition is a hallmark of his literary work, reflecting his deep appreciation for the role of music in African American culture. Hughes

recognized that music, particularly genres such as blues, jazz, and spirituals, was not only an expression of Black identity but also a vital component of the oral tradition that shaped African American life. Hughes' poetry is often characterized by its rhythmic and melodic qualities, drawing inspiration from the music of the African American community. For example, his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" incorporates repetitive, song-like phrasing that evokes the style of spirituals, creating a sense of historical continuity and cultural memory. The poem's structure and language reflect the musical traditions that have been passed down through generations, linking Hughes' work to the broader oral and musical heritage of African Americans.

In addition to reflecting musical forms in his writing, Hughes also celebrated the cultural significance of music by incorporating its themes and motifs into his work. His poetry frequently addresses the emotional and social dimensions of music, exploring how it serves as a means of expression, solace, and resistance. By foregrounding the role of music in his writing, Hughes not only honored its place within African American culture but also demonstrated its importance as a form of oral tradition that shapes and reflects lived experiences. Hughes' engagement with music as oral tradition also underscores his broader commitment to capturing the rhythms and realities of African American life. Music, as an expression of both individual and collective experiences, provided Hughes with a rich source of inspiration and a means of connecting with his audience. Through his incorporation of musical elements, Hughes was able to convey the emotional depth and cultural resonance of Black experiences, enriching his literary work with the vitality and authenticity of African American musical traditions.

### **Engagement with the Oral History of the African American Experience**

Langston Hughes' engagement with the oral history of the African American experience is a key aspect of his literary legacy, reflecting his commitment to preserving and amplifying the voices of Black individuals and communities. Hughes recognized the importance of oral history as a means of capturing the lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations of African Americans, and he incorporated these elements into his writing to create a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of Black life. In his short stories, poetry, and essays, Hughes frequently drew upon oral histories and personal narratives to explore the realities of African American life. His work often features characters and scenarios that reflect the experiences of ordinary Black people, using their stories to illuminate broader social and cultural themes. By incorporating these personal narratives into his writing, Hughes was able to provide a more intimate and empathetic portrayal of Black life, highlighting the richness and diversity of African American experiences.

Hughes' engagement with oral history also involved a focus on the communal aspects of storytelling and cultural memory. His work often reflects the ways in which oral traditions serve as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge and values. Through his writing, Hughes demonstrated how storytelling functions as a communal act, connecting individuals to their cultural heritage and to one another. This emphasis on communal storytelling reinforced the importance of oral traditions in shaping and sustaining African American identity and culture. Furthermore, Hughes' use of oral history and personal

narratives served as a form of cultural affirmation, validating the experiences and voices of Black individuals who had often been marginalized or overlooked by mainstream literature. By incorporating these narratives into his work, Hughes challenged dominant literary conventions and ensured that the stories of ordinary Black people were recognized and valued. This commitment to preserving and amplifying Black voices was a central aspect of Hughes' literary mission and contributed to the lasting impact of his work.

### **Revitalizing African Myths and Traditions**

Langston Hughes' revitalization of African myths and traditions is a significant aspect of his literary work, reflecting his broader commitment to exploring and celebrating the connections between African and African American cultures. Hughes recognized the importance of African cultural heritage in shaping the experiences and identities of African Americans, and he drew upon African myths and oral traditions to enrich his writing and connect his work to its broader cultural context. Hughes' incorporation of African myths and traditions often involved a blending of traditional African elements with contemporary themes and concerns. This approach allowed Hughes to explore the intersections between African and African American cultural expressions, highlighting the ways in which African heritage continued to influence and shape the experiences of Black individuals in the United States.

One example of Hughes' engagement with African myths and traditions is his use of African cosmological themes and symbols in his poetry. For instance, his poem "The Negro and the Racial Mountain" incorporates elements of African mythology and spirituality to explore themes of racial identity and cultural pride. By drawing on African myths and symbols, Hughes was able to create a more nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of African American experiences, connecting them to a broader cultural and historical context.

Hughes' revitalization of African traditions also involved a focus on the ways in which these traditions intersected with and influenced African American cultural expressions. His work often reflects the influence of African musical forms, storytelling practices, and artistic traditions, demonstrating how African cultural heritage continued to shape and inform African American life. Through his writing, Hughes highlighted the importance of preserving and celebrating these cultural connections, ensuring that the rich legacy of African traditions was recognized and valued within the literary and cultural spheres.

### **Blending of Folk Traditions with Contemporary Issues**

Langston Hughes' blending of folk traditions with contemporary issues is a distinctive feature of his literary work, reflecting his ability to use traditional cultural elements to address and critique modern social and political realities. Hughes' integration of folklore, oral traditions, and cultural practices with contemporary themes allowed him to create a dynamic and relevant body of work that resonated with readers across different contexts. Hughes' approach to blending folk traditions with contemporary issues often involved the use of folkloric elements to explore and critique societal norms and power structures. His short stories, poetry, and essays frequently address themes such as racial inequality, economic hardship, and social justice, using traditional cultural forms and motifs to shed light on these



issues. By incorporating folklore into his exploration of contemporary problems, Hughes was able to create a more layered and multifaceted understanding of the social and political landscape.

For example, in his short story collection “The Ways of White Folks,” Hughes uses folkloric themes and characters to address issues of racial discrimination and social injustice. The stories often feature elements of African American folklore, such as the trickster figure or traditional proverbs, to explore the complexities of race relations and the experiences of Black individuals. This blending of folk traditions with contemporary issues allows Hughes to engage with social critique in a way that is both grounded in cultural heritage and relevant to current concerns. Hughes’ ability to blend folk traditions with contemporary issues also reflects his broader commitment to capturing the rhythms and realities of African American life. By using traditional cultural forms to address modern problems, Hughes was able to create a literary voice that was both rooted in the past and engaged with the present. This approach not only enriched his work with cultural depth and authenticity but also ensured that his writing remained relevant and impactful in addressing the ongoing challenges faced by African Americans.

## CONCLUSION:

Langston Hughes' engagement with folklore and oral tradition profoundly shaped his literary legacy, highlighting the richness and resilience of African American culture. By incorporating vernacular language, folkloric themes, and musical elements into his work, Hughes created a distinctive and authentic literary voice that celebrated Black identity and addressed pressing social issues. His use of oral traditions, from the trickster figure to traditional proverbs, allowed him to explore themes of resistance and cultural pride with both depth and accessibility. Hughes' celebration of music, particularly blues and jazz, infused his poetry with a rhythmic and emotional resonance that connected his writing to the lived experiences of African Americans. Additionally, his focus on oral history and communal storytelling preserved and amplified the voices of ordinary Black individuals, enriching the literary landscape with diverse and dynamic narratives.

## REFERENCES:

1. Huggins, N. S. (1971). *Harlem Renaissance*. Oxford University Press.
2. Hughes, L. (1994). *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Vintage Classics.
3. Lupton, C. (2014). *Langston Hughes and the Art of the Harlem Renaissance*. University of North Carolina Press.
4. Rampersad, A. (2002). *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume I: 1902-1941, I, Too*, Sing America. Oxford University Press.
5. Wintz, C. D., & Finkelman, P. (Eds.). (2004). *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.