

The Transitional Phase in Langston Hughes's *Mulatto*

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Abstract

Written against an intensely social conscious background of 1930s America, Langston Hughes' record breaking play Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South, has to its credit 373 performances on Broadway. The play deals with a theme much too familiar to the audiences – the stereotyped notion of prejudices based on racial discrimination. The play is also remarkable in the sense that it brings about a culmination of sorts in the Negro Drama as it provides the much needed impetus to, at least, bring about a change in the age – old African-American sensibility by making the whites admit that the blacks were indeed victims. In the play, Norwood, a stereotyped representative of the white people, typifies this view, but resists any change at any front in the then prevalent scenario. However, what is important is the effort on the part of Robert, the mulatto protagonist, who succeeds in challenging the Norwood kind of mentality and thereby making the latter accept many of the things that had hitherto been a taboo. This is largely seen by critics as the beginning of a common shared platform for addressing issues of apartheid.

Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967) was an American poet, novelist, playwright and short story writer. Writing in the great tradition of black writers, Langston forcefully renders the 'black experience'. In doing so, he gives expression to this kind of artistic creed, and creates characters of flesh and blood, dramatizing the black-white theme, that has changed the social, political, moral and ethical landscape of America.

Mulatto is Hughes' first 'professionally produced play'. It was written in the early 1930s and first performed on Broadway in 1935 but was not published until 1963. It is based on the two - act structure. The 'germ idea' of Hughes' play *Mulatto*, as Webster Smalley rightly pointed, was first expressed in one of his early poems entitled "Cross," which clearly shows the inner conflict of the play's protagonist Robert:

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If I ever cursed my white old man
I take my curse back.
If I ever cursed my black old mother

And I wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.
My old man died in a fine big house,
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black

Mulatto was thus conceived on the racial lines of Black and White, the oppressed and the oppressor, the slave and the master. But when a white plantation owner, Colonel Thomas Norwood, disowns his son Robert, whom he refuses to recognize as his own, the play tends to look over rather unrealistic horizons, for a father's relation to his son must transcend the racial barriers. However, in its present form and theme the play unfolds a painful melodrama. In an introduction to *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 5*, Leslie Sanders and Nancy Johns believe that *Mulatto* deals with "father – son conflict, the power of class and whiteness, the legacy of slavery, and the vicious oppression of the South" (17).

Throughout the action , the setting of the play is a big house on a Georgia plantation. Colonel Thomas Norwood, the white plantation owner is frustrated that Sallie Lewis, the youngest of his mulatto children by his African American housekeeper Cora, has not left yet to catch the train that will take her to school for the semester. He discusses his frustration with Sam, his personal African American servant. Another of Norwood's mulatto children, Robert, whom Cora calls Bert, is supposed to drive Sallie to the station, but Bert has driven to town to get some radio tubes without Norwood's permission. Norwood says that Bert should be in the fields picking cotton and threatens to have him whipped. It would be important here to say that the play is densely populated by mulattos. Both the White and Black are minorities in the play. Neither the White realizes that he is losing control nor the black is aware that he is gaining power. Only the Mulatto the offspring of the two is conscious of this. That shows Hughes' clear vision of the future at that time. The future is not going to be for one 'color' or race.

Sallie, a very light-skinned mulatto who could pass for white, comes down to say goodbye to Norwood. She thanks him for sending her to school and he is pleased to hear that she is learning cooking and sewing. She says she wants to become a teacher and Norwood dismisses the idea, saying that he will probably send her north to live with her older sister whom he thinks is a cook. Robert arrives from town and picks up Sallie. At the same time, Fred Higgins, a county politician, arrives and warns Norwood that Robert was causing problems in town. Robert picks up his package of radio tubes, but they were destroyed in the mail and the post office refuses to return his money. When he argues with the white woman behind the counter, the mail clerks throws him out. Higgins is concerned that Robert is going to rile up other African Americans to think they are as good as the white.

Politicians like Higgins sensed the danger from the very beginning and warned Norwood from having such intimate relationship with his black servant. Higgins goes to the extent of telling Norwood that he should marry again instead of just sleeping with Cora. He says that it would be more socially acceptable and that having a white woman around the house would help keep Norwood from being too soft on the African Americans on his plantation. Norwood and Higgins leave to look at Norwood's cotton fields; on the way out, Norwood tells Cora that he wants to talk to Robert.

William, the oldest of Cora and her eldest mulatto child from Norwood discuss with his mother for the first time how Norwood beat Robert, when little Robert called him papa in front of a group of important white visitors. They talk about the fact that Robert is going to get himself and the rest of the 'slaves' on the plantation in trouble if he does not stop his rash behavior.

William: I tried to tell him something the other day, but he just laughed at me, and said we's all just scared Niggers on this plantation. Says he ain't no no nigger, no how. He's a Norwood. He's half-white, and he's gonna act like it. (p.14)

Robert returns to the 'Big House', calling himself Mr. Norwood. However, he drops his act when he sees his mother crying over the distress he has put her through. Robert says that he is half-white and will act like his white half. He says that his six years at school have shown him that not all 'blacks' have to yield to white people like they do on the plantation. Robert refuses to listen to his mother who asks him to behave like a colored person. She tells him "when de Colonel comes back ... talk right to him, boy. Talk like you was colored 'cause you ain't white" (19). Robert shows his father's stubbornness by telling his mother Cora that "Besides you, there ain't nobody in this country but a lot of evil white folks and cowardly niggers. (Earnestly) I'm no nigger anyhow. Am I, ma? I'm half-white. The colonel's my father – the richest man in the country... (18).

Robert and William get in a fight and Cora breaks it up, sending William into the kitchen so that she can talk to Robert. She tells Robert that she is scared that his behavior is going to hurt them all in the end and she is even more concerned when she hears about Robert's behavior at the post office that morning. She tells him to be respectful to Norwood when he returns and act like a 'black' man that he is.

Robert tells her that he is not going to work in the cotton fields anymore, and Cora notes that they all have to do things they don't like, such as lying to the Colonel about the fact that Sallie is really studying typewriting, not cooking and sewing.

Norwood arrives in his car and Cora tries to hurry Robert into the kitchen. However, Robert refuses to use any door but the front door, like white people do. As a result, when Norwood comes in through the front door, he almost runs into Robert. Shocked, he threatens Robert with his cane, but Robert stands up to Norwood who drops his cane in fear. Robert stalks proudly out the front door and Norwood, in a rage, grabs his pistol from a drawer. Cora "overtakes him, seizes his arm, stops him" and says: He's our son, Tom. (she sinks slowly to her knees, holding his body) Remember, he's our son" (19). Norwood is too nervous to use his pistol.

Act II, scene 1 starts in the evening of that same day when the Colonel requests to see Robert, and Cora tells her son to agree with whatever Norwood says. Robert agrees as long as Norwood does not try to hit him again. Cora returns to her room and Norwood comes into the room to talk to Robert. He asks Robert why he is causing problems, but tells him that before he answers, Robert better speak to him like a colored person. Robert says that he is Norwood's son and Norwood says that Robert has no father.

It is not clear why Norwood gave the privileges of education and care to what he thinks of as "bastards". Early in the play Sallie, the daughter, is heading North to continue her school. Robert himself is back after six years of schooling. Audience and readers wait to the last scene to know from Norwood that the mulatto children, as long as they act slavishly, have the right to study, live, and not to be physically punished. Obviously, this has not been the case 35 years ago when Norwood 'raped' Cora then took her as mother of his "seemed to be" children.

Norwood:Now, I'm going to let you talk to me, but I want you to talk right.

Robert: (Still standing). What do you mean, "talk right?"

Norwood: I mean talk like a nigger should to a white man.

Robert: Oh! But I'm not a nigger, Colonel Tom. I'm your son.

Norwood: (Testily). You're Cora's boy.

Robert: Women don't have children by themselves.

Norwood: Nigger women don't know the fathers. You're a bastard. (Robert Clenches his fist. Norwood turns toward the drawer where the pistol is, takes it out and lays it on the table). (22-23).

Many other points of contrast between the past and present in the play need to be dug for. The play is replete of what is unsaid, yet it is there, between what was and what is. The society of the play has undergone many steps towards loosening the grip on the colored. Higgins would have already punished Robert severely before talking to Norwood had he followed the old rules of dealing with the colored. Instead he comes to discuss the matter with Norwood. Unknowingly, Norwood has given power to Robert through giving him a margin of freedom. The play therefore invites a deconstructive reading that discusses the decentering of the White and the Black towards new subject positions.

Lamb Robert Paul points out that *Mulatto* is an attempt "to present the biracial male African American's struggle for paternal acceptance and a place in southern society" (134). Norwood refuses to listen to Robert and orders him to leave the plantation, and when Robert refuses, Norwood pulls the pistol on him. Robert disarms Norwood and chokes him to death. Cora hears the struggle and comes down, horrified to see Norwood lying on the floor. She tells Robert to escape into the swamps. He grabs the pistol and runs out the front door, narrowly missing two white men who have come to see Norwood. When the two men see that Norwood is dead, they call the sheriff to get a mob of white people to chase Robert. The men leave and Cora talks to Norwood's body. She criticizes Norwood for lying there when she should be helping Robert, his son. She then says that she knows Norwood is faking, that he is not lying there and that he is really out there running after Robert. By her comments, the audience can see that Cora is insane. Cora goes upstairs to make a hiding spot for Robert under her bed. Bienvenu, Germain believes that "Bert is an intelligent, capable, insightful black man with leadership skills, and even if Bert were an Uncle Tom, he would have been a threat to all white racists who defend their notions of supremacy on an insecure belief in non-white inferiority" (342).

With the death of Colonel Norwood, the black and mulatto characters of the play gain freedom and realize that they have entered a new phase of relationship with the white. In Act II, scene ii which is supposed to be an hour later, Sam and the undertaker discuss Robert's fate and the fact that there are only colored people left on Norwood's plantation now.

The undertaker expresses interest in Cora and has Sam go get her so that they can get some alcohol. However, when Cora comes out, she says that she will only take orders from Norwood and that she is waiting for him to return. The undertaker realizes that Cora has been driven insane. The undertaker leaves and Sam tells Cora she is a fool for acting like that. Then he realizes that with Norwood dead, he is free, and leaves. Livonia, the cook, comes into the room and tells Cora that almost all of the colored people on the plantation have fled, except for William, who comes to speak with her. William says he is leaving and tries to take his mother with him, but Cora says she is waiting for Robert and Norwood to return. William is frightened at his mother's crazy talk and leaves. Cora talks to the empty room, remembering how she became Norwood's mistress when she was fifteen.

Cora: And de years went by. And I was always ready for you when you come to me in de night. And we had them chillums, your chillums and mine, Tom Norwood, all of 'em! William, born dark like me, dumb like me, and then Baby John what died; then Bertha, white and smart like you; and then Bert with your eyes and your ways and your temper, and mighty nigh your color; then Sallie, nearly white, too, and smart, and purty. But Bert [Robert] was you' chile! He was always yo' child ... Good looking, and kind, and headstrong, and strange, and stubborn, and proud like you, and de one I could love most 'cause he needed de most lovin'. And he wanted to call you "papa," and I tried to teach him no, but he did it any how and (Sternly) you beat him, Colonel Thomas Norwood. (Act II, P33).

The mob arrives outside looking for Robert who does not give them a chance to catch him alive by shooting himself with the last bullet in his pistol. The white Norwood, at the end, dies at the hand of his own unacknowledged son. Robert is definitely dead by his own hand to stop the White from having the privilege of killing him. As a mulatto, Robert kills not only his Black half but also simultaneously kills his other White half. What remains is the idea of yellowness. The Black and White have been in clash for hundreds of years, so it is time to discuss and negotiate what has gone wrong on both sides.

The White in the play, Norwood and Higgins, repeatedly say that few years ago they did not have to worry about any violations against their unquestionable masterhood over the Black. Higgins accuses Norwood of starting a lenient stage in having children from a negro woman and giving her and her children this much of care.

To use the deconstruction formula, in the past the White were always privileged to the Black, whereas at present Robert, although for a short while, flips the metaphysical hierarchy to strongly suggest that the black, or the mulatto, are equal to the white. Robert's greatest power stems from Norwood's and other white characters' argument that the only criterion for the metaphysical hierarchy to survive is the very coloring of the skin, nothing else.

The play makes the argument of the White stupid and not able to in confront Robert's magical question "Why....?" It turns Norwood's argument stupid and silly when he tries to answer " his son's" question about his basic rights to call him father and enter and leave through the front door. Similar to Norwood, no White audience or reader can answer Robert's questions with any bit of logic.

Undoubtedly, *The Mulatto* is a remarkable artistic hit against racial discrimination. It transcends its specific and limited scope to include every manifestation of racial discrimination worldwide. It proves the ground of discrimination to be shaky and null. The color is no more than an ungrounded factor. By themselves white, black, yellow, and the rest are indifferent. Repetition, to use Saussure and Derrida, make people live and behave as if the color of the color makes a social and political difference.

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