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POVERTY, HOPE, AND GAMES OF CHANCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CONGOLESE YOUTH AND LANGSTON HUGHES' SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: The increasing involvement of Congolese youth in lottery and other games of chance has become a major social concern, as many young people perceive gambling as an alternative means of escaping poverty and unemployment. This study examines the relationship between poverty, hope, and gambling by comparing the experiences of Congolese youth with the social realities portrayed in Langston Hughes' short stories, particularly *Thank You, Ma'am* and *One Friday Morning*. The main objective is to demonstrate how economic hardship and social inequality encourage unrealistic expectations through games of chance while reinforcing cycles of frustration and hopelessness. The study is grounded in the theory of social realism and adopts a qualitative comparative approach based on textual analysis of Hughes' literary works, documentary review, and observations of gambling practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The findings reveal that poverty, unemployment, and limited opportunities are the principal factors driving young people toward gambling, while Hughes' narratives illustrate similar mechanisms of social exclusion and the search for dignity. The study concludes that sustainable employment opportunities, public awareness campaigns, and stronger regulation of gambling activities are essential to reduce youth dependence on games of chance and promote genuine socio-economic development.

Keywords: Congolese youth; poverty; gambling; Langston Hughes; social realism.

Résumé : L'implication croissante des jeunes Congolais dans la loterie et autres jeux de hasard est devenue une préoccupation sociale majeure, car beaucoup perçoivent le jeu comme un moyen alternatif d'échapper à la pauvreté et au chômage. Cette étude examine la relation entre pauvreté, espoir et jeux de hasard en comparant les expériences des jeunes Congolais avec les réalités sociales représentées dans les nouvelles de Langston Hughes, notamment *Thank You, Ma'am* et *One Friday*

Morning. L'objectif principal est de montrer comment les difficultés économiques et les inégalités sociales encouragent des attentes irréalistes à travers les jeux de hasard, tout en renforçant les cycles de frustration et de désespoir. L'étude s'appuie sur la théorie du réalisme social et adopte une approche comparative qualitative fondée sur l'analyse textuelle des œuvres de Hughes, la revue documentaire et l'observation des pratiques de jeu en République Démocratique du Congo. Les résultats révèlent que la pauvreté, le chômage et le manque d'opportunités sont les principaux facteurs qui poussent les jeunes vers le jeu, tandis que les récits de Hughes illustrent des mécanismes similaires d'exclusion sociale et de quête de dignité. L'étude conclut que la création d'emplois durables, les campagnes de sensibilisation et une régulation plus stricte des activités de jeu sont essentielles pour réduire la dépendance des jeunes aux jeux de hasard et promouvoir un véritable développement socio-économique.

Mots-clés : jeunesse congolaise ; pauvreté ; jeux de hasard ; Langston Hughes ; réalisme social.

Introduction

Poverty and unemployment remain among the most persistent socio-economic challenges affecting young people in many developing countries, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In recent years, the rapid expansion of lottery and other games of chance has attracted a growing number of young people who view gambling as a potential means of improving their living conditions. While gambling is generally promoted as a recreational activity in many societies, several studies have shown that economic hardship, social exclusion, and unemployment may encourage vulnerable populations to perceive games of chance as an alternative source of income rather than entertainment. At the same time, literature has long reflected the consequences of poverty and social injustice on young people's aspirations and life choices. Among American writers, Langston Hughes vividly portrayed the struggles of African Americans facing racial discrimination, poverty, and limited opportunities in short stories such as *Thank You, Ma'am* and *One Friday Morning*. Although these stories were written in a different historical and geographical context, they raise social issues that remain relevant to the experiences of many Congolese youths today.

Despite the growing popularity of gambling among Congolese youth, little scholarly attention has been paid to the relationship between economic vulnerability, hope for social mobility, and the representation of these realities in literary works. Consequently, an important question arises: to what extent can Langston Hughes' portrayal of poverty, hope, and social exclusion help explain the increasing attraction of Congolese youth to games of chance as a strategy for escaping poverty?

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between poverty, hope, and gambling among Congolese youth through a comparative analysis of selected short stories by Langston Hughes and contemporary socio-economic realities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How are poverty and hope represented in Langston Hughes' short stories? (2) What socio-economic factors encourage Congolese youth to engage in lottery and other games of chance? (3) What similarities

and differences exist between Hughes' literary representation of social exclusion and the experiences of contemporary Congolese youth?

This study is anchored in the theoretical perspective of **social realism**, which considers literature as a reflection of social realities and inequalities. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative comparative approach based on textual analysis of Langston Hughes' selected short stories, documentary analysis of existing literature on gambling and youth poverty, and observational evidence concerning gambling practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This combination of literary criticism and socio-economic analysis provides a broader understanding of the mechanisms through which poverty shapes expectations and behavioural choices among young people.

The paper is organised into four main sections. The first section reviews the concepts of games of chance and gambling within the Congolese context. The second analyses the literary representation of poverty, hope, and social injustice in Langston Hughes' selected short stories. The third discusses the comparative findings between Hughes' literary vision and the socio-economic realities experienced by Congolese youth. Finally, the paper concludes by summarising the major findings and proposing recommendations aimed at reducing young people's dependence on gambling through sustainable employment opportunities, public awareness, and appropriate public policies.

I. Brief Overview

Games of chance have existed for centuries and constitute one of the oldest forms of human entertainment. Historical evidence indicates that gambling activities were practiced in ancient civilizations such as China, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, where people used dice, lotteries, and other random mechanisms for amusement, divination, and economic gain (McMillen, 1996). Today, games of chance have become a global industry regulated differently across countries. Although many governments authorize gambling as a source of public revenue and leisure, researchers emphasize that these games are characterized by uncertainty because outcomes depend entirely or predominantly on chance rather than on players' knowledge or skills (Williams, West, & Simpson, 2012).

From a socio-economic perspective, gambling occupies different positions according to the level of economic development of a society. In many developed countries, lottery games, casinos, and sports betting are generally regarded as recreational activities practiced occasionally by individuals with stable incomes. Conversely, in several developing countries, where unemployment, poverty, and social inequalities remain widespread, gambling increasingly becomes a perceived survival strategy rather than a leisure activity. Studies have shown that financial insecurity and limited employment opportunities encourage economically vulnerable populations to invest repeatedly in games of chance despite their very low probability of success (Abbott, Stone, Billi, & Yeung, 2017). This situation often creates unrealistic expectations, financial losses, and long-term psychological distress.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo illustrates this phenomenon. In recent years, lottery companies and sports betting agencies have expanded rapidly throughout major cities, particularly Kinshasa, attracting large numbers of unemployed young people. For many of them, gambling is

viewed as an accessible opportunity to escape poverty and improve their living conditions. However, because lottery outcomes are entirely random, repeated participation rarely leads to sustainable financial improvement. Instead, many young people lose the little resources available to them while maintaining hope that future draws will eventually change their lives. This paradox between hope and disappointment raises important social and economic concerns regarding youth vulnerability and the consequences of prolonged dependence on gambling.

It is within this context that the present study compares the experiences of Congolese youth with the social realities portrayed in Langston Hughes' short stories, particularly *Thank You, Ma'am* and *One Friday Morning*. Although Hughes wrote during the period of racial segregation in the United States, his literary representation of poverty, social exclusion, and the search for dignity provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding similar mechanisms affecting vulnerable youth in contemporary Congolese society. Through this comparative perspective, the study seeks to demonstrate that structural inequalities, rather than individual failure, largely explain the attraction of economically disadvantaged youth to games of chance as an imagined pathway toward a better future.

I.1. What does the game of chance consist of?

Games of chance are activities in which the outcome depends entirely or predominantly on randomness rather than on the participants' knowledge, physical abilities, or strategic decisions (Williams, West, & Simpson, 2012). They include lotteries, sports betting, casino games, scratch cards, and other forms of gambling where participants stake money in the hope of obtaining financial rewards. While these activities are often presented as harmless entertainment, numerous studies indicate that economically disadvantaged populations are more likely to perceive gambling as a potential solution to financial hardship than as a simple leisure activity (Abbott et al., 2017). Consequently, games of chance frequently become symbols of hope for individuals who have limited access to employment and other opportunities for upward social mobility.

This socio-economic dimension of hope is particularly relevant when interpreted through the literary works of Langston Hughes. Although Hughes does not explicitly depict lottery games in *Thank You, Ma'am* or *One Friday Morning*, his characters constantly struggle against poverty, exclusion, and limited life opportunities. In *Thank You, Ma'am*, Roger attempts to steal Mrs. Jones's purse because he lacks the financial means to satisfy even a modest personal desire. Instead of condemning him outright, Mrs. Jones recognizes that poverty often shapes human behaviour. Hughes writes: "*I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if He didn't already know*" (Hughes, 1958, p. 35). This statement acknowledges that economic hardship may push individuals toward desperate choices without necessarily defining their moral character. Rather than punishment, Hughes advocates understanding, guidance, and social responsibility as responses to poverty.

The situation portrayed by Hughes closely resembles the experiences of many Congolese youths today. Faced with unemployment, precarious living conditions, and limited economic prospects, many young people are attracted to lottery games and sports betting because they perceive them as one of the few available opportunities to transform their lives. Like Roger, they are not necessarily motivated by greed but by the desire to overcome material deprivation and recover a sense of

dignity. However, whereas Roger encounters compassion and a genuine opportunity for personal transformation, many Congolese youths encounter an expanding gambling industry that offers hope without providing sustainable solutions. Their repeated participation in games of chance often deepens financial insecurity instead of reducing it.

A similar message emerges from *One Friday Morning*, where Nancy Lee, despite her academic excellence, is denied an educational opportunity because of racial discrimination. Hughes observes that structural barriers—not individual shortcomings—prevent talented young people from fulfilling their aspirations (Hughes, 1941). Although the Congolese context differs from that of segregation-era America, many young people experience comparable forms of structural exclusion resulting from poverty, unemployment, weak institutions, and unequal access to education and employment. As a consequence, gambling becomes an imagined shortcut to success when legitimate opportunities appear inaccessible.

Therefore, games of chance should not be understood merely as recreational activities but as social phenomena reflecting broader economic and structural inequalities. Hughes' literary works demonstrate that when societies fail to provide equitable opportunities, vulnerable youth naturally seek alternative paths toward hope and social recognition. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the rapid expansion of gambling among young people should thus be interpreted less as an individual moral failure than as a symptom of persistent socio-economic exclusion. This comparative perspective allows literature to illuminate contemporary realities while showing that the search for dignity and a better future remains a universal human aspiration.

I.2. What does lotto consist of?

In DR-Congo this game consists of paying 200 FC or more than that to the agent of lotto, then composing at least five numbers out of 90. Those numbers can be as follows :90,45,5,44 or 77,01,30,05,10 He/she waits for the result within twenty or more than twenty minutes after playing. It takes almost all the day long to play it. That is, they start playing from 6:30 A.M to 23:30 P.M. There are fourteen drawings. My meeting with Mrs. Mary Kenda a young married woman on May 22, 2026 surprised me very much. This is what she declared with a frightening voice:

Mrs. Mary : I don't know what am I going to do.

John : What's wrong?

Mrs. Mary : I spent all the money my husband gave me for lunch. I don't know what to do because soon my children are coming from school, I could not cook anything for them and probably my husband also is back from work.

John : How much was it?

Mrs. Mary : Twenty dollars.

John : What are you going to do now?

Mrs. Mary : I have no idea right now. Maybe I will borrow something from a friend.

John : If she does not have it?

Mrs. Mary : I don't know what to do.

John : Do you think this game is advantageous?

Mrs. Mary : I don't think so.

Mr. John : Will you play lotto again?

Mrs. Mary : I won't try it any more. I thought that it would provide me with enough money, but I am really disappointed.

John : Have you ever got a considerable amount of money from it before?

Mrs. Mary : Not at all. Only a little amount such as an equivalent of four or five American dollars. This time, I decided to stake more money in order to get more and more. But, it is a very bad experience for me. That will never happen again in my life.

I.3. Who can play the game of chance?

In many legislations only adults can play it, but not children as in the Congolese legislation. But a few of them play it where there is no one to prevent them from playing it. However, it is crucial to consider factors like age, the child's maturity, and the game's content to ensure safety and appropriate engagement. In DR-Congo, children under 18 years old are not allowed to play games of chance. This depends on any country's legislation. Generally, children around 6-7 years old can start playing simpler online games, especially those designed for younger audiences. A child's ability to handle online interactions such as dealing with strangers and understanding game content is crucial. Teenagers of about 13 can engage with a broad range of games, including more mature content.

People(adults) generally don't play for fun, but to win a lot of money to make future plans. When the result appears, if not everybody who played, then the majority complain for using wrong numbers, but still hopes to win in the following match.

I.4. How does this poverty consist of?

In this case of "lotto RDC", crowds of youngsters after completing either high school or university studies or those who did not study enough because their parents are simply poor, they take their time playing "lotto" expecting to get much money to plan their lives.

Some ask, borrow or beg money from friends, relatives or those they supposed to have much money to play the it. They are facilitated playing the game with almost the equivalence of 10 cents. When the result is out, most of them lose de game because there is large number of choice to make and if one plays only one turn or twice with a few money, there is much chance to lose the game.

At the end of the day, many are not able to play any more by lack of money. For example, one day a young boy named Richard in Matete Township, was caught by the police because he had

borrowed money from different persons that he was unable to hand back. As they knew where he was regularly playing the game, by any chance they came one after another to get their money back. They met more than four persons, and then they took him to the police office.

His family was obliged to pay for it. On July 22, 2024, I discussed with Mrs. Mary Kasongo about the game; she told me that she would no longer play it anymore. She declared what follows: “the game is tricky, when I was playing, I was playing this game some years ago, the same number could never be repeated, but now it can as several times as possible to confuse players. Two other rubrics are added apart from the main one. You may use right numbers, but they are put on the other two rubrics not on the main one. I simply loose. Recently, I used money that was supposed to buy food for my family in lotto, all the money was gone. I was obliged to borrow some coins from friends for shopping. Therefore, I decided not to play it anymore”.

I.5. Who should win the lotto game?

How often should I play to win the lottery if I’m lucky? The simple answer is that, it is hard to win a game of chance as mentioned in:

The answers generally agree that winning the lottery is extremely difficult, with odds often in the hundreds of millions. They suggest that playing should be viewed as entertainment rather than a reliable way to make money, and advice against spending essential funds on tickets.

I.6. When should lotto game be played?

As this game is played for entertainment, normally it should be played during the weekend to allow anyone taking leisure time sufficiently, but in the DR – Congo, it is played from Monday to Sunday, from 6:30 A.M to 11:30 P.M.

I.7. What is the best approach to win lotto game chance?

There is no appropriate proven strategy to predict this game as far as numbers are drawn entirely at random. The best approach is to play responsibly, understand the odds, and enjoy the game without relying on it as a financial strategy or source of money.

I.8. Congolese legislation about gambling and games of chance

Concerning the gambling game or lotto in DRC, they are known from August 17,1927 Ministerial Order n°041/MJS/CAB/2100/2011.

Of course, the law exists but it does not at all protect the youth concerning its use. That is why companies of games of chance just do it as business, but not for entertainment. Therefore, we can see for example for the case of lotto game (and others) being played for the whole day as a regular job, which is not fair at all.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between poverty, hope, and games of chance through a comparative analysis of Langston Hughes' selected short stories and the socio-economic realities experienced by Congolese youth. The analysis has demonstrated that gambling should not be interpreted merely as an individual recreational activity but as a social response to persistent economic hardship, unemployment, and limited opportunities for social mobility. Hughes' literary works reveal that poverty and exclusion profoundly influence human aspirations and behaviour, a reality that remains strikingly relevant in the contemporary Democratic Republic of the Congo. By comparing literary representation with present-day social conditions, this study has shown that the search for dignity, recognition, and a better future constitutes a common thread linking Hughes' characters to many Congolese young people.

The comparative approach adopted in this research also highlights the continuing relevance of literature in understanding contemporary social phenomena. Through characters such as Roger in *Thank You, Ma'am* and Nancy Lee in *One Friday Morning*, Hughes demonstrates that social inequalities are often the consequence of structural conditions rather than personal failure. Similarly, the increasing involvement of Congolese youth in lottery games and sports betting reflects broader socio-economic challenges instead of simple individual irresponsibility. The study therefore contributes to literary criticism by illustrating how African-American literature can provide valuable analytical perspectives for interpreting present-day African realities and by emphasizing the universal nature of struggles against poverty, exclusion, and hopelessness.

The findings of this study have important implication for public policy and social development in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Reducing young people's dependence on games of chance requires more than stricter regulation of gambling activities; it also demands comprehensive socio-economic interventions. Public authorities should strengthen employment creation programmes, vocational training, entrepreneurship initiatives, and financial inclusion policies aimed specifically at young people. Educational institutions, civil society organizations, and the media should also implement awareness campaigns highlighting the financial risks associated with excessive gambling while promoting realistic pathways to economic empowerment and personal development.

Finally, this study opens new perspectives for future research. Further investigations could explore the psychological effects of gambling on young people, compare gambling behaviours across different African countries, or analyse additional literary works addressing poverty, hope, and social inequality. Quantitative studies involving larger samples of Congolese youth would also complement the qualitative findings presented here and provide broader empirical evidence for policy formulation. Ultimately, addressing youth vulnerability requires coordinated efforts involving governments, educational institutions, families, community organizations, and the private sector to create sustainable opportunities capable of transforming hope from an uncertain gamble into a realistic prospect for social and economic advancement.

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