Humor and Translation: A Case Study of Black Humor in Langston Hughes's Poetry

Behnoush Akhavan [1]; *Pezhman Asad* [2*]

[1] *Islamic Azad University South Tehran Branch*

[2] *Islamic Azad University South Tehran Branch*

ABSTRACT

Black humor plays a crucial role in fulfilling Langston Hughes's anti-racist purposes as an integral notion in his poetry. Accordingly, translation(s) of his poetry are to benefit from the same indexes on the basis of equivalent effect principle. On this account, 33 black-humor-rich poems of Hughes, translated by Ahmad Shamloo, Yaghma Golruee and Hassan Fayyad, were selected to be analyzed contrastively in search of black humor indexes in the target text (TT). Then they were all analyzed based on the six-leveled Knowledge Resources (KR) hierarchy, including *Language (LA), Narrative Strategy (NS), Target (TA), Situation (SI), Logical Mechanism (LM)* and *Script Opposition (SO)*, proposed by Attardo and Raskin. The result demonstrated that all the levels remained approximately intact through the translation except the LA and SO which appeared the most vulnerable. That is, mistranslation at the language level of a linguistic chunk which has a direct implication to specific scripts of black humor leads to the loss of black humor indexes in the TT.

Keywords: Humor, Black humor, Incongruity theories of humor, Black Humor indexes

1. Introduction

In rendering a text, translators face several features which are to be translated for audience of different backgrounds, cultures and experiences. Such features are in direct connection with source text author, reader, and cultural background. These critical indexes take different forms when they are integrated into an author's literary work. For the Afro-Americans, their social, cultural and political indexes took the form of *Black Humor* in Langston Hughes's poetry who flourished as the Dean of Negro Writers during the Harlem Renaissance.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Claiming one's own rights indirectly is a strategy that reduces the harmful sense of words. Subsequently, the claimants can cry out their words in an implicitly silent, but at the same time audible voice. As Tracy (1993, cited in Chasar, 2008, p. 30) maintained, Langston Hughes was one of those who rose against racial discrimination via this channel and "as a poet, Hughes was truly an amazing writer who found ways to express the forbidden feelings of African-Americans in his little poems". He made himself heard through his poems which were significant in some specific respects. One significant aspect of Hughes's poetry was its indirect way of uttering poignant points. This bitter and indirect language is a type of humor known as black humor that is used in literature, drama, film or poetry to express insensitivity, paradox or cruelty of the modern world (Columbian Encyclopedia, 2007). On this account, one of the problems that a translator may face in rendering Hughes's poetry is its outstanding sharp notion of black humor through the pertinent indexes as the key concept of the source text.

1.2. Purpose and Rational

Black humor plays a crucial and leading role in Hughes's poetry in representing Negros, con-

Corresponding Author Email: Asad.Pezhman@gmail.com

demning Jim Crow Laws[i] and criticizing racist movements in the world, specifically America. Along with movements taken in antiracial field, literary works simultaneously helped the Negros in regaining their rights. Since Hughes's concern is a global one and is not limited to a specific community, the translation of his poetry can help other nations develop their literature to accompany their civil movements. Subsequently, recognition of black humor in the target text becomes notable in demonstrating whether the target text implies the original message by means of black humor.

1.3. Research Question

The research question that was addressed in this research included whether the Persian translations of Hughes's poetry benefited from the same indexes of black humor as internalized in the source text. In other words, the source text poems took advantage of indexes that fulfilled Hughes's both political and anti-racist purposes. The point of discussion is whether the target texts have the same indexes to fulfill the poet's intention.

1.4. Hypotheses

Considering the fact that black humor is internalized in the source text's form and content coherently, the hypothesis of the study is that the translators of Hughes's poetry missed the notion of black humor in the source text and accordingly failed to render the indexes of black humor into the target text.

2. Literature Review

Translating black humor, in the first step entails recognition of humor. On this account, numerous theorists and scholars have maintained their views and understandings toward the issue. According to Halabi (1985) an aspect of literature of oppressed nations is the spread of humor and its various subdivisions among its people. Moreover, different writers had different intentions of using humor in their literary works. Brillinger (2002) believed that humor helped addressees recognize the encounter of reality and expectations. Such encounter was intended to highlight the crisis which was an issue of concern to the author. This function of humor is visible in ap

proximately all Hughes's poems in which the poet tries to make the reality of black life and their expectation encounter.

2.1. Black Humor

According to Cuddon (1984) the word *humor* was used in physiology to denote the four humors of body that depended on four fluids namely blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Combination of these determined the character, mind, disposition and morality of people in terms of "ill-humored', 'good-humored', 'in black mood', 'yellow with jealousy' and etc.

Linguistically speaking, Jeske (2004) further traced black humor as being originated from black bile and stated that black humor was noted for grotesqueness and morbidity. According to Jeske (ibid, p. 331), "when an excess of black bile was attributed to an ancient philosopher, he bore the same characteristics". Evidently, black humor is rooted in peoples' feelings and experiences such as facing unequal, unjust, grotesque or morbid behavior and that verifies the elaboration of O'Neill about black humor in terms of 'Comedy of Entropy'. One of the most outstanding examples of such behavior ever witnessed was that of colonialism whose subjects comprised mostly the black race.

2.2. Black Humor in Hughes's Poetry

James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was greatly influenced by the history of Africans in America. Hughes became active in social and political issues through his poetry as a means of social protest and later became one of the most outstanding figures of Harlem Renaissance. This movement marked the beginning for the major publishers and critics to take African-American literature seriously (Encarta, 2008).

Regarding the rationale behind his own poetry, Hughes (1947, p. 22) maintained that it rose from the people he knew, "those whose shoes were not always shined, had never been to Harvard, and had never heard of Bach". In this regard, poverty, Jim Crow policies and color, the two elements with which Hughes was born, turned his poetry different from the rest of people. This is in line with Abram's (1999, p. 278) definition of black humor stating that "most of the current vogue of black humor occurs in static works whose butt is what the author con

ceives to be the widespread contemporary condition of social cruelty, inanity and chaos". These elements constitute the underlying indexes of black humor in Hughes's poetry, in the context of Negro Studies. Subsequently, it is observed that Hughes's poems are black in terms of music, voice, theme and form. His poems are black at bottom to condemn the racist behavior towards the poorly treated blacks, to clamor for attention and call for unity.

2.3. Humor Classification

Through history, various scholars and theorists as Keith-Speigle (1972), Prudie (1993, as cited in Plaza 2006), Raskin (1985), and Attardo (1994) presented and elaborated on their classifications regarding humor. Systematically approaching the notion, Carrell (2007) presents a comprehensive approach towards humor:

- Cognitive/perceptual or incongruity;

- Social/behavioral or disparagement;

- Release/relief or psychoanalytical.

In this classification, the first group is an event-oriented class and essentially cognitive and is based on some objective characteristics of a humorous text or act. The second class, i.e. the producer-oriented one, accentuates the negative attitude of the producer and/or user of humor towards its target. This class is typically based on political, ethnic or gender ground. The recipient-oriented theories of humor, which constitute the third group, focus on the psychological effects humor brings about in the recipient.

Considering this background of the theory, the incongruity and release theories were traced in the poems of Langston Hughes. The former witnessed the breach of equality rule and the latter supported the relief due to the white-race's oppression. However, the disparagement theory failed to define the works of Hughes as his poems are complaint cry of such disparagement on Blacks.

2.4. Black Humor and Translation

Considering the culture bound nature of humor, translating it pertains to the semantic level of the language that requires a proper approach of translation. Accordingly, Attardo and Raskin (1991, as cited in Krikmann 2007) developed a six-leveled hierarchical representation model of verbal jokes, which proved to be a device for evaluating the "semantic distance", or degree of similarity between particular joke texts. This hierarchy of knowledge resources includes levels of Language, Narrative Strategy, Target, Situation, Logical Mechanism, and Script Opposition.

3. Methodology

3.1. Material

In order to investigate the translation of black humor indexes in Hughes's poetry, the poems rich in black humor were selected as the source along with their translations from the following sources.

The English text as the source text included:

- Rampersad, A. & Roessel, D. (1995), *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, New York**:** Vintage Classics

The Persian translations as the target texts included:

- شاملو، احمد، مجموعه ی آثار ـ دفتر دوم: *همچون کوچه ای بی انتها* (گزینه ای از اشعار شاعران بزرگ جهان)، تهران: نگاه ۱۳۸۶

- فیاد، حسن، *آوازهای غمناک* ـ برگزیده شعرهای لنگستون هیوز، تهران: ثالث ۱۳۸۷

- گلرویی، یغما، *جهان در بوسه های ما زاده می شود*، تهران: دارینوش ۱۳۸۳

Along with the source and target text, the comparison was based on accredited sources of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries.

3.2. Data Collection

Data collection of the study was conducted purposively rather than randomly for the sampled poems of Hughes so that the case study would benefit from two major factors. Firstly, the selected poems had to have at least one translation in Persian and secondly, they were to bear indexes of black humor. Surely each translator had his own logic and rationale for selecting a number of poems to render into Persian. To focus on black humor in those poems, the variable of translators' sampling method and approach were not taken into account. With respect to these requirements, first the translated poems were marked; thereafter those bearing the mentioned black humor indexes were selected. This led to 33 poems[ii] for the purpose of analysis.

Table 1. Knowledge Resources and pertinent subcategories

Knowledge Resource (KR)	Subcategory
Language (LA)	The surface form of the text that includes issues as Phonetics – Phonology – Morphophonemic – Morphology – Lexis – Syntax - Pragmatics
Narrative Strategy (NS)	The genre and micro-genre of the text which may take the form of a riddle, conundrum, expository etc.
Target (TA)	The ethical, social, political etc. personages or the stereotype at whom the text is aimed
Situation (SI)	The set of details as time, place, objects, activity, instruments and other participants next to the target
Logical Mechanism (LM)	The mechanism used to oppose the scripts as simple reversal, false priming, simple juxtaposition etc.
Script Opposition (SO)	This is centered on the issue that the intended text is always fully or partially compatible with two distinct scripts and that the two scripts are opposed to each other in a special way (LM) as real vs. unreal, good, vs. bad, high stature vs. low stature, white vs. black, free vs. captive, front vs. back, big, vs. small, dark vs. bright etc.

3.3. Procedure

Having defined the source texts, each poem was compared with its translation(s) based on the theoretical framework of the six-leveled model of Attardo and Raskin (1991, as cited in Krikmann 2007) presented in the following table.

Each sample was analyzed at all the above knowledge resource levels ranging from language to script opposition to investigate the black humor indexes. Accordingly, the same analysis was done on the Persian texts to find the black humor indexes at each level. After that, based on the differential models of LA>NS>TA and LM>SO>SI, the findings were studied to define that at which level the black humor index was lost and at which level it was retained or compensated. This differential model states that if the index of black humor in the source poem and the translation differed at the language level (LA) the poems were more similar than the time they differed at the narrative strategy (NS) level and so on. This rule was true for the KRs at two different hierarchies. One included the LA, NS and TA and the other covered LM, SO and SI.

4. Data Analysis

The multifarious nature of the methodology of this study yielded a showcase of output that is thus presented hereafter. For each poem, the table of analysis (Table 1) containing the pertinent KRs was provided and based on that table the poems were analyzed on the account of black humor indexes. These indexes included general issues as racism, prejudice, lost dreams, discrimination, lynching, limited opportunities, slavery, injustice, compulsory obedience, scorning blacks, etc.

The poems take advantage from the indexes of black humor in two ways of subject matter and the figurative aspects of language. However, as these two levels cover an extended area of concepts, it was decided to highlight the intended concepts on which this analysis was to be based. Subsequently, the analysis at subject matter level is supposed to define the concepts, issues and traits of black humor through the scripts of discussion in each poem while figurative language analysis studies the contribution of the linguistic innovations in conveying the black humor indexes. As demonstrated, the subject matter of the poems was rendered with the highest rate of black humor indexes as it contained the main message of the poem in its core. However, the figurative language appeared more vulnerable and challenging. To elaborate on the analysis better, the poem "Daybreak in Alabama" was analyzed based on the mentioned model (See table 2) and the results are highlighted hereafter.

5. Poem: "Daybreak in Alabama"

Figurative Language

Starting with the title, the name sounds as break in 'Prison Break'. This daybreak symbolizes equality which Hughes did like to convey to his country at that period of time. Considering the translations, "سپیده دم" happens earlier than "طلوع آفتاب" and this issue is missed in the translation by Shamloo since "daybreak" is associated with cockcrow. This association is intended to render good tidings of the coming light that mostly happens at "سپیده دم".

When the poet uses the word "purtiest", he wants to say that his songs comprising of indi-

viduals' intentions and hopes are pure and sincere and both the poet and the listener will relish in saying it; even when he talks about black and white people. Both of the translations by Shamloo and Fayyad missed the pure and sincere notion.

One of the notions introduced in the poem is the universal similarity which involves images of hands. The fact that they are all just hands is emphasized by the lines "white hands, black hands, yellow hands". The repetition of the word "hands" with different colors states that whatever the color, they are all hands. Hereby, the poet tries to establish the very universal similarity by the simple word "hands" that is a means of taking brotherhood promise. Shamloo maintained the same repetition of word "دستای" while Fayyad mentioned this word just once.

In this poem the poet intends to capture all the colors in a place together through the pine needles. Therefore the issues of slavery vs. master become meaningless in such a situation. The notion of "Needle" is rendered in translation by Shamloo but missed in the one by Fayyad. In poem "Daybreak in Alabama" the NS, TA, SI, and LM are all retained in translation while LA and SO are not fully rendered.

The same analysis was done to all the 33 poems and the results showed that from among the six levels of KR, the four levels of TA, SI, NS, and LM remained intact while the two levels of LA and SO appeared the most vulnerable. Based on this analysis, the following charts were extracted; each one highlighting the relation between LA mistakes and SO loss in the translations by Shamloo, Fayyad and Golruee:

Table 2 – Linguistic Elements of "Daybreak in Alabama"

| KR	ST - Hughes	TT – Shamloo	TT – Fayyad
	Daybreak	طلوع آفتاب	سپیده دم
	Purtiest Songs	خوشگلترین مقاما	قشنگترین ترانه ها
	Pine Needles	سوزنکای کاج	برگ درختان کاج
LA	Long Red Necks / Poppy Colored faces/ Big Brown Arms/ Field Daisy Eyes	سینه سرخای دمدراز/ صورتای شقایق رنگ/ بازوهای قوی قهوهای/ چشمای مینایی	گردنهای سرخ دراز/ چهرههای قزمز/ بازوان بزرگ قهوهای/ چشمانی به رنگ گلهای داوودی دشتها
	white hands and black hands and brown and yellow hands And red clay earth hands	با دستای سیا و دستای قهووبی و دستای زرد با دستای خاک رُسی	و دستهای سیاه و قهوهای و زرد و دستهایی به رنگ خاک سرخ زمین،
NS	Expository	The same NS is retained	The Same NS is retained
TA	The poem is aimed at a colleague or a social reader	The Same TA is retained	The same TA is retained
SI	The setting is the dark Alabama that looks forward to daybreak	The setting is retained	The setting is retained
LM	First starts with a dream, then shifts to the images of human interaction and eventually re-mentions the dream	The same mechanism is retained but the last part that fails to surprise the reader by re-mentioning his dream.	The Same LM is retained
SO	The Scripts include real Vs. unreal, black Vs. White, Dark Vs. Bright, Sincere Vs. Insincere, Captive Vs. Free.	The majority of scripts are retained.	The majority of scripts are missed.
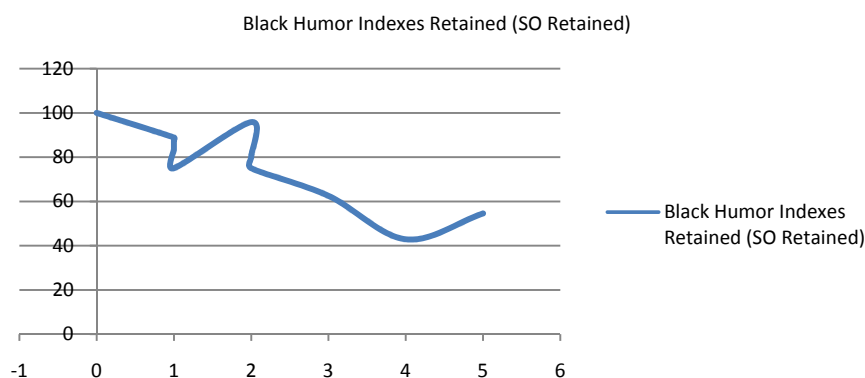
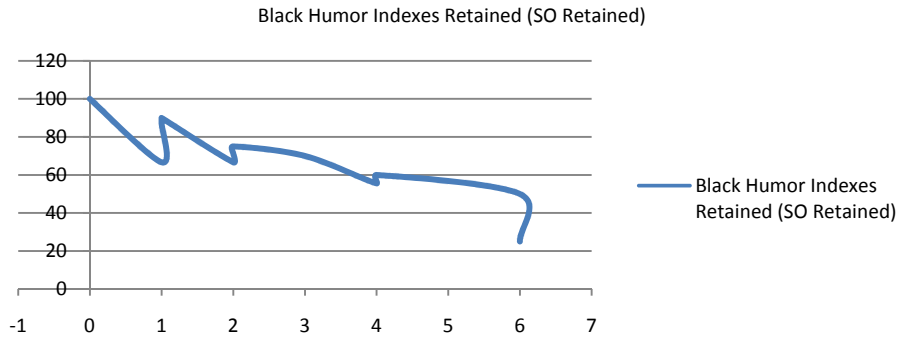Figure 1: Relation between LA mistakes and SO loss in translations by Shamloo

Black Humor Indexes Retained (SO Retained)

Figure 2: Relation between LA mistakes and SO loss in translations by Fayyad

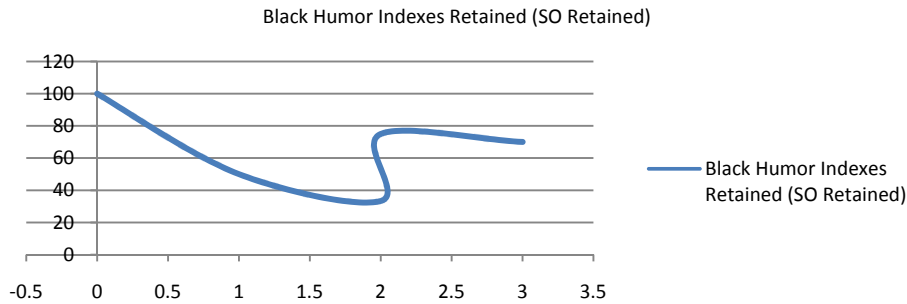Black Humor Indexes Retained (SO Retained)

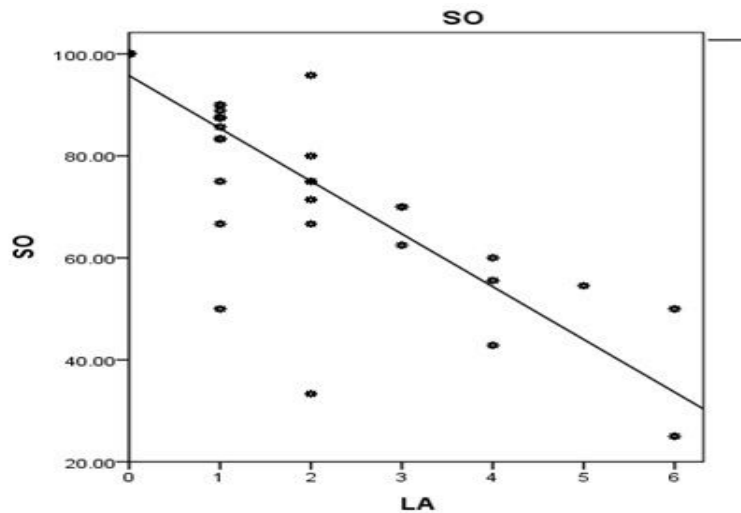Figure 3: Relation between LA mistakes and SO loss in translations by Golruee

Figure 4: Linear Regression chart of LA mistake influence on SO

The negative slope of the curves in the above charts is clearly verified by the linear regression chart which is provided by means of SPSS statistical software. For this purpose, the researcher provided the whole statistics of translators' mistakes at LA levels and the retained script oppositions in the TT as the input data. Subsequently, the outcome was the following chart which de

monstrates the negative slope of the curve.

Scientifically speaking, this states that at the meaningful level of 0.05, the presupposition that LA has no effect on black humor indexes is nullified and the negative slope of the curve in the linear regression chart demonstrates that an increase in LA mistakes causes a decrease in the black humor indexes in the translation.

References

Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A glossary of literary terms* (7th ed.). Massachusetts: Earl McPeek.

Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Brillinger, M. (2002). *Nabokov's Humor: The Play of Consciousness*. Retrieved Jan. 11, 2009 from http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nzlbitstreaml2292 /36 7 *120102whole*.pdf

Carrell, A. (2007). *Historical Views on Humor*. Retrieved Jan. 11, 2009, from http://www.uni-duesseldorf.de, www. MathNatiRuch/ PSY356 Web articlesl Historical_ Views.pdf

Chasar, M. (2008). *The sounds of black laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes.* American Literature, 80, 1. Duke University Press. Retrieved January 16, 2009, from http://american-literature. duke-journals.org/cgi/ reprint/80/1/57 .pdf.

Cuddon, J. A. (1984). *The Penguin dictionary of literary terms and literary theory*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Encarta (2008). Microsoft Encarta and Student Program [Computer software]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.

Hughes, L. (1947). My adventures as a social poet. *Phylon,* 8, 3. 205-212. Retrieved Dec. 22, 2009, from http://negroartist.com/writings/My Adventures as a Social Poet.pdf

Jeske, J. (2004). *Storied words, the writers' vocabulary and its origin*. Retrieved July 4, 2009, from Google Books database.

Keith-Spiegel, P. (1972). Early conceptions of humor: Varieties and issues, In Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (eds.), *The Psychology of Humor*. 14, 3- 39. New York: Academic Press.

Krikmann, A. (2007). *Contemporary Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/ vol33/ kriku.pdf

O' Neill, P. (2001). *The Contexts of Black Humour.* Retrieved Dec. 10, 2008 from http://ejoumals. library. ualberta.ca/ index.php/ crcllarticle/ viewF*ile /2606 /200*118.

Plaza, M. (2006). *The function of humor in Roman verse satire*, *Laughing and lying*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rampersad, A. & Rossel, D. (1995). *The collected poems of Langston Hughes.* New York: Vintage Classics.

Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Boston: D. Reidel.

The Columbian Electronic Encyclopedia. (6th ed.). (2007). Columbia University Press.

حلبی، علی اصغر؛ مقدمه ای بر طنز و شوخ طبعی در ایران، چاپ اول، تهران: پیک، ۱۳٦٤، (1985).

شاملو، احمد؛ دفتر دوم: همچون کوچه ای بی انتها، گزینه ای از شاعران بزرگ جهان، تهران: نگاه، ۱۳۸٦.

فیاد، حسن؛ آوازهای غمناک، برگزیده شعرهای لنگستون هیوز، تهران: ثالث، ۱۳۸۷.

گلرویی، یغما؛ جهان در بوسه های ما زاده می شود، مجموعه شعر جهان، تهران: دارینوش، ۱۳۸۳

Behnoosh Akhavan

She received her Ph. D. in English literature (postmodernist)

Pezhman Asad

He received his B. A. from Shahid Bahonar University, Kerman and his M. A. from IAU Tehran South Branch, in Translation. He is working ad a freelance translator, at present.

[i] A segregationist legislation, separating blacks and whites

[ii] "Daybreak in Alabama", "Afro-American Fragment", "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", "As I Grew Older", "Negro", "I Dream a World", "Strange Hurt", "Still Here" and "Merry-go-round", "Let America Be America Again", "Ballad of the Landlord", "Florida Road Workers", "The Weary Blues", "Bible Belt", "Dusk", "I Too", "Ku Klux", "Harlem", "Cross", and "Aunt Sue's Stories", "Death in Yorkville", "Border Line", "As Befits a Man", "Militant", "October 16: The Raid", "Our Land", "Freedom", "Park Benching" and "Theme for English B", "Question", "Justice", "Will V-Day Be Me-Day too?", and "Peace".