A Lesson in Attitude from Langston Hughes’ “I, Too, Sing America”

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**Introduction:**

Let me begin with a famous quote by Zora Neale Hurston: "Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me." That’s what I call attitude. Seeking ratification from the privileged section of the society has been the undoing of many a colonized as well as enslaved communities. In this sense, this study is a quite relevant lesson for the postcolonial Indian society.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was the first black writer in America to earn his living from writing. He was, I certainly feel, a man of great attitude in this sense. I am aware you can get a detailed account of his biography from the various AI-powered search engines. However, I am afraid I will have to get into a bit of biography and other writings to do justice to the poem I plan to discuss with you here: “I, Too, Sing America”.

**Understanding the Poet:**

From 1928-1930, Hughes lived in New York and was a prominent member of the 'Harlem Renaissance', the name given to the flowering of intellectual and cultural activity amongst the black community of New York at the time. The Harlem Renaissance was successful in that it brought the Black experience clearly within the mainstream corpus of American cultural history. Characterizing the Harlem Renaissance was an overt racial pride that came to be represented in the idea of the New Negro, who, through intellect and creation of art and literature, would serve to uplift the race. If you go through any major research on ‘Harlem Renaissance’, we could easily comprehend the huge impact of Langston Hughes on its development. Evidently, he had a vital role to play in building.

His main concern was the uplift of his people, of whom he judged himself the adequate appreciator, and whose strengths – resiliency, courage, and humor – he wanted to record as part of the general American experience. Permeating his work is pride in the African American identity and its diverse culture. "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind," Hughes is quoted as saying. Mercer Cook, an African American scholar observed that his work had a lot to do with the famous concept of *Négritude*, of black soul and feeling.

One of the young black writers observed of Hughes, "Langston set a tone, a standard of brotherhood and friendship and cooperation, for all of us to follow. You never got from him, 'I am *the* Negro writer,' but only 'I am *a* Negro writer.' He never stopped thinking about the rest of us." Hughes disdained the rigid class and color differences the 'best people' drew between themselves and Afro-Americans of darker complexion, of smaller means and lesser formal education.

**Hughes and other Great Men:**

His advice on how to deal with racists was 'Always be polite to them... be over-polite. Kill them with kindness.' If you find in this exhortation the fragrance of the ancient Tamil seer Thiruvalluvar, you are in a large company. But, he insisted on recognizing that all whites are not racist, and definitely enjoyed the company of those who sought him out in friendship and with respect. This would certainly place him at par with the ideals of the luminaries like Mahatma Gandhi and Luther King Jr.

**Introducing His Poetic Bend:**

Now, let us turn to his poems: His first published poem was also one of his most famous, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” In this poem it is the heritage of Afro-American spirituality, which is recalled by the poem's majestic imagery and repetitions of sounds. Written when Hughes was only seventeen, as he travelled by train across the Mississippi, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' is a beautiful statement of strength in the history of black people, which Hughes imagines stretching as far back as ancient Egypt and further into Africa, the cradle of civilization. The poem returns at the end to America in a moment of optimistic alchemy when he sees the ‘muddy bosom’ of the Mississippi ‘turn all golden in the sunset’. The metaphors call for an intense experiential understanding.

**Detailing the Poem:**

*I, Too, Sing America* (Knopf, 1925) was written just before his return to the US from Europe and after he had been denied passage on a ship because of his colour (again, a similitude with the Mahatma). The poem has a contemporary feel in contrast to the mythical dimension of 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'. It is no less powerful, however, in its expression of social injustice. The calm clear statements of the 'I' have an unstoppable force like the progress the poem envisages. Hughes's dignified attitude and his beautiful speaking voice render it all the more moving. The poem uses excellent language, vivid imagery and strong sounds to express the poet’s feelings towards racism. It can be seen as an anti-discrimination poem, which graphically represents the injustice of racism. The poem is very effective because of its genuine emotions.

The poem describes a black man’s personal experience with [racial discrimination](http://www.exampleessays.com/essay_search/racial_discrimination.html). He is treated as if he is an embarrassment to the white people, and made to feel inferior to them. The poet is trying to show how America “covers up” her [racial discrimination](http://www.exampleessays.com/essay_search/racial_discrimination.html) “problems.” Here, it could be seen as Hughes’ answer to Walt Whitman’s poem ‘I Hear America Singing’.

It's very likely that Hughes' poem addresses another point of racism too, racism within one's own race. Lighter-skinned blacks in the time of the Harlem Renaissance were known as yellows or bronzes and often felt superior to their "darker brother," who didn't as easily fit into white society. This is seen in much of his other work, along with the works of other writers likes James Baldwin. During that period, the "yellows" imagined themselves as part of the greater white community, and tried to throw off their African heritage. I think this poem is as much an indictment of them as it is of "White America".

**Decoding the Attitude:**

Now, I shall go into the poem and try to cull out certain attitudes that flow out as the thoughts meander through the trough of words:

Common sense: *But I laugh/ And eat well/ And grow strong*.

Optimism: *Tomorrow, I’ll be at the table*…

Vengefulness: *Nobody’ll dare/ Say to me*…

Indignation: *Then*. *If it were my enemy… but, it is my own brother*… (Biblical *Psalms*)

Romantic Cinderella-ism: *Besides, … how beautiful I am/ And be ashamed*.

Industriousness: *And eat well, and grow strong*. The response to the subjugation is not mere passivity nor languishing in squalor. A clarion call is given to those who have been thrown to the circumference or the subalterns to enhance themselves physically and mentally.

We can see many values presenting themselves one after the other in the poem. The poet is quite clear about the overarching value that he expects the enslaved masses to make their own. He expects them to develop confidence in self by equipping oneself with required skills according to one’s abilities. The passive melancholic attitude is totally to be avoided. A victim attitude is something that should be shunned. Some critics say this poem is Hughes’ response to Whitman’s poem ‘I Hear America Singing’. I leave it to your expertise. What I stress is that Hughes, in this poem, tries to present a blueprint of attitudes to be imbibed by any individual who is made to pass through troublesome situations like slavery, indifference, loneliness, failure, and so on.

**The Ebb and Flow of Tone:**

Obviously, the tone changes throughout the poem. In the first line, the tone is patriotic. The line, “I, too, sing America,” indicates the national anthem, and symbolizes unity throughout the nation. In the next stanza, the tone is of anger and strength. The man is enraged at how he is treated, but he knows he is strong enough to fight back. This is shown in the line, “But I laugh,/ and eat well,/ And grow strong.” The following stanza’s tone is of warning and caution. There is not much to speak about by way of rhyme. The number of lines in each stanza, too, do not leave much scope for a pattern. The fourth stanza ‘Besides, … ashamed’ seems to be an afterthought. The need to balance the effect of saying ‘darker’ in the beginning seem to be fulfilled in these words.

**Structure and Its Message:**

Before bidding adieu, I would like to speculate a little on the structure of the poem and what it says. We see the first and the last stanza or line could be taken as similar though the implications are much different. The ‘I’, which is just one among the singers of America in the first line, has dared to claim identification with America or, at least a part of American identity in the last line. The second stanza begins with the detailing of the complexion of the ‘I’ while the penultimate stanza ends speaking of that time in the future when the assailants would realize the beauty in their ‘darker brother’ and feel ashamed of what they had done to him.

In between, we have the third stanza, which speaks of the real action that is expected to take place in future. This could be seen as having the chiastic structure of argumentation. This particular structure, much prevalent in the Bible, struck my mind because there are several Biblical allusions that could be read into the poem. One has already been referenced earlier. Another one is the story of Joseph and his brothers from the Book of Genesis. According to the story, the jealous elder brothers deal quite badly with Joseph to the extent of even throwing him into a pit and eventually selling him to the merchants going to Egypt. However, the end is quite interesting: Joseph gradually is raised to be the ruler of Egypt and the spiteful brothers are made to beg him for their own life.

**In Conclusion:**

The poet is calling upon his fellow Afro-Americans who have been subject to various social evils from their fellow citizens to maintain a dignified attitude. In order to assist such an attitude, he urges them to enhance their skill sets as well as their physical well-being. It is in keeping with the age-old dictum ‘A sound mind in a sound body.’

Let me conclude with the same quote by Zora Neale Hurston – as given in the beginning – to make it a chiastic presentation:

"Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me."