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“Black is Beautiful” - Acceptance and Endurance as Langston Hughes’ Recommendations for Awakening

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Abstract

Langston Hughes was one of the most renowned writers of Harlem Renaissance and a prominent Black writer to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for black artists. Generally, people who rebel against any kind of discrimination and oppression, emphasize on “resistance” as a key concept. However, mere resistance does not change things. There are other two most important aspects which one needs to learn for the process of awakening. They are ‘acceptance’ and “endurance”. Langston Hughes who is known for his realistic portrayals of black life in America describes the importance of acceptance and endurance in his poems. The paper attempts to explicate how flooded with pride in the African-American identity Langston Hughes’ poems emphasize that acceptance and endurance make the African Americans to laugh, eat and grow strong.

Keywords

Acceptance; Endurance; Langston Hughes; Recommendations for Awakening.

Being an African American in the United States during the early 1900's was not easy, and many lived a life of destitution. Yet, Langston Hughes found a positive twist in the life full of suffering and managed to create inspiring poetry and become one of the most renowned writers of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that included many writers from the Caribbean whose post-colonial voices form a choir with the children of American. Hughes stressed on racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self-hate. His thoughts united people of African descent and Africa across the globe to encourage pride in their diverse black folk culture and black aesthetic. Hughes was one of the few prominent black writers to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for black artists.

Like every African American living in a nation, where it was told that all are equal by *The Declaration of Independence*, but not treated on par with the other race, Hughes too was frustrated. But he uses his annoyance with the situation to create optimistic and patriotic poetry as a way to mentally overcome the country's racism and have hope for a better future. His poems speak out against racism and oppression and agitate for working class liberation, among other. While writing against racism and oppression, Langston Hughes like any other writer does not advise rejection or denial. Rather he recommends acceptance and endurance as fundamentals for awakening and freedom.

In his poem "I Too" he describes the way African American domestic servants are treated when guests arrive at the owner's home. However he goes on to explain in the poem how instead of getting disappointed and paralyzed at this treatment one can accept what they are called and their position and convert the situation into an optimistic one.

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed. (1-17)

The poem begins with Hughes stating that, "I, too, sing America/ I am the darker brother" demonstrating that he and many African Americans like him also sing the national anthem and have every right to the freedom it represents. The speaker begins by declaring that he too can "sing America," and claims his right to feel patriotic towards America, even though he is the "darker" brother who cannot sit at the table and must eat in the kitchen. This alludes to the common practice of racial segregation during the early 20th century, when African Americans faced discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives. They were forced to live, work, eat and travel separately from their white counterparts, had few civil or legal rights, were often victims of racial violence, and faced economic marginalization in both the North and the South.

When there are guests at the house, the speaker is dismissed to the kitchen. This kind of a treatment will definitely make one feel humiliated. But Hughes is not disturbed by this behaviour of his master. He says, "But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong" because he is sure that this behaviour of the

whites will definitely not shunt his growth but there is a better day awaiting him. He knows that the future for African Americans is becoming brighter and brighter each and every day. He takes all that he can from his bad situation and grows stronger rather than weaker. The oppression, however, doesn't stop him from laughing and growing strong.

Then the speaker envisions a future in which he will be no longer sent to the kitchen and no one would dare to call him unequal. They (presumably, the white majority) will see him as beautiful and “be ashamed” at their previous prejudice. He does not languish in despair, however. He is extremely hopeful and optimistic. The speaker demonstrates a heightened sense of self and proclaims his ambition to assert his legitimacy as an American citizen and as a human being.

In this short poem, the speaker begins with a note that he is "the darker brother", referring to his skin color, and then makes reference to the fact that he is sent "to eat in the kitchen / when company comes", as if he were a black slave in a white household. Acceptance of what is in the now moment opens your awareness and gives you options and choice. It could be choice to do something to change the circumstance, and then you go and do that with acceptance. You laugh, eat well, and grow strong.

In another poem titled “I Dream a World” the poet again emphasizes the importance of acceptance and endurance:

A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind. (1-7)

Problems of inequality and discrimination would take decades to reverse, but even in the first half of the twentieth century, Hughes believed in the promise

of change. In these lines the poet also recognizes the price of this utopia in his description of “joy, like a pearl.” While pearls are valuable and beautiful, they are borne of a painful process of endurance on the part of the oyster. Somehow the suffering endured by socially-wounded races would benefit “all mankind” in Hughes' dream.

Thus Langston Hughes who is known for his realistic portrayals of black life in America describes the importance of acceptance and endurance in his poems. While writers like W. E. B. Du Boise, Jessie Faust and Alain LeRoy Locke were overly accommodating and assimilating Eurocentric values and culture to achieve social equality, Hughes had different goals and aspirations. He tried to depict the “low-life”, that is the real lives of blacks in the lower social-economic strata in his work. Of course he criticized the divisions and prejudices based on skin colour. But he identified as unashamedly black at a time when blackness was *démodé*. He stressed the theme of “black as beautiful” as he explored the black human condition in a variety of depths.

Hughes wanted young black writers to be objective about their race, but not to disrespect it or run away from it. He believed that acceptance and endurance were the most important elements that the people of any depressed class should learn in the process of awakening. Accepting their position in the society and enduring the suffering with great strength, according to Langston Hughes would give the African American the courage and potency to fight back and step forward. To Langston Hughes acceptance by the white world was less important. The expression of the dark-skinned selves is more important to him. In almost all his poems he insisted the idea that black culture should be celebrated, because it is unique and it is in no way lesser than white culture. He advocated this belief in his “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, “Let America be America Again”, “One Way Ticket”, and many others. Hughes' works directly explored the lives of the African Americans, their hopes, their fears, their past, and their dreams. The African American characters in Hughes' works embody all the complexities of life in a segregated America. He writes from the

point of view of struggling depressed class, frustrated dreamers, disenfranchised students, and biracial children. However, he always portrayed them as finding dignity and self respect in their daily struggles. His work calls attention to his characters' strength, endurance, and the purity of their souls. Hughes who in his poem "My People," exhorts the beauty of African American people, comparing them to stars and the sun and the night praises their physical beauty as well calling "black is beautiful" defying the "white" standards of beauty that dominated popular culture during the early 20th Century.

Many of the speakers in Hughes' poems like the black boy who was sent to eat in the kitchen start their narration with a tone of dejection and bleakness. However, in these poems, Hughes commonly creates a narrative that culminates in the speaker reaching a state of self-actualization. Despite his or her difficult surroundings, these individuals are able to find inherent inner strength, allowing them to persevere against the odds. His works that are flooded with pride in the African-American identity emphasizes that acceptance and endurance make the boy who was asked to eat in the kitchen when company comes to laugh, eat and grow strong.

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