

Poetic Revolution: A Study of Nikki Giovanni's Vogue in the Light of Select Poems

Sarath Krishna A, Anila Elizabeth John, Abhijith R.
Assistant Professor(English), Assistant Professor(English), L.D.Clerk
Department of English,
Mar Ivanios College of Arts and Science,
Mavelikara,
Kerala, India

Abstract: The research paper emphasizes on the aspects of racism and revolutionary ideals depicted in the works of the African American poet Nikki Giovanni. The study presents an outline of African American poetry and Giovanni as a poet, and explores the racial aspects focusing on the denial of Black individual identity. The growth of Giovanni as a black female poet by embracing the revolutionary ideals is also traced out. This identity as a black female poet is regarded as an inevitable aspect of her poetry and is used as a tool to trace the issue of gender. The paper places Giovanni as a revolutionary in the time when revolution was yet to be born. She tries to bridge the gap between the Whites and the Blacks.

Key Words: African American Poetry, Revolutionary Ideals, Black Arts Movement, Black Identity, Racism

Nikki Giovanni is one of the most vital and eventually most famous voices in the Black Arts Movement and Giovanni challenges the existing assumptions about poetry. With more than a dozen volumes of poetry to her credit, Nikki Giovanni has been instrumental in shaping the direction of the contemporary Black American Poetry. Giovanni is an activist and revolutionary in spirits and she has been named as the Princess of Black Poetry. Giovanni, through her poetry, consistently attacked the elitism in the Black Arts Movement and she focused on presenting a realistic, yet positive picture of black life including both the new and established voices. Giovanni can be regarded as one of the most powerful figures on the new black poetry scene, both in language and appeal.

Giovanni's volumes of poetry deal with both personal and political topics. These works are marked by the rage against white Americans that was largely responsible for earning her the label of a revolutionary poet. The strong voice of a Black Female Poet was emerging and she also addressed the questions of female identity. Giovanni, herself addresses to the problems of the Black woman and she puts all her poetic force and

rhythm into illuminating the situation. She philosophized that poetry is the culture of people and she established this philosophy by taking her poems to the people.

The nature of Giovanni's poetry cannot be fully understood nor its significance in recent literary history be established, unless critics provide more perceptive interpretations and assessments of her work. The judgment one infers from popular response to Nikki Giovanni's poetry may ultimately provide more reliable critical assessment than that gleaned from professional sources, because such popular judgements are often made by listeners as well as readers, and depend on reactions to the immediate clarity of lines; the impact of tone, rhythm and language; and the integrity of the realism in Giovanni's depiction of African Americans and their experience. Her poems encouraged both black solidarity and revolutionary action and apart from all the other Black poets, Giovanni always had a constructively emotional impact on the collective racial ego of Black America.

Through her poetry, Giovanni has chosen to communicate with the common reader as well as with the artists and critics and consequently she has used graphic images from everyday African American life. She has stressed the orality of her short poems by assimilating into them, the rhythms of Black conversations and the heritage from blues and the spirituals, reflecting these origins both in rhythmic patterns and borrowed phrases. Giovanni has tended to focus on the single individual, situation or idea, often with a brief narrative thread present in the poem.

The state of Black Americans was grim during 1960s. The Black Americans suffered humiliation, insult, embarrassment, and discrimination. Many neighbourhoods, businesses and unions almost totally excluded blacks. African American writers before the 1960s had been caught in the defensive position of insisting on their own humanness and protesting the inhumanity of their predominantly white audience. The flourishing of black writers and artists of which Giovanni was a part is the late 1960s has frequently been compared to the Harlem Renaissance, a period of remarkable creativity in literature, music, dance, painting, and sculpture by African Americans.

The writers of new renaissance wrote to and for a black audience; their writing offered an affirmation of black identity rather than simply a protest against white racism; and they consciously viewed their art as an instrument of social change. These differences all point to a new concept of literary and cultural separatism

- a deliberate effort to break with the Western literary tradition. A crippling opinion was unwittingly revealed by Louis Simpson in a review for Gwendolyn Brook's books, "I am not sure it is possible for a negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro. On the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important." Such a definition of literary excellence ensured that no black writer could be admitted to the canon of great Western literature.

The new renaissance paved way for a great change and this change was reflected in the black intellectual and literary world by a call for the rejection of the Western tradition and the establishment of a new separatist black aesthetic. The young intellectuals, writers, and artists began to shape what came to be known as the Black Arts Movement. The black arts movement denounced the integration and orientation of the old Civil Rights coalition and called for a new strategy based on black pride, black dignity and the black self-determination. It envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. The new concept of black aesthetic began to be explored by many writers. James Turner, in his essay, "Black World" identifies the central significance of Black Nationalism as "the emergence of Black group consciousness, self-assertion, and cultural identity."

Through the black art movement, they wanted to possess an art that would actually reflect back life and its history and legacy of resistance and struggle. They wanted an art that was as black as their music, an art that would educate and unify black people in our attack on an anti-black racist America. "Poetry for the People" meant the use of language and rhythms of black speech and music. Music in particular was reclaimed in "Poetry for the People" because of the recognition that "black music is our most advanced form of black art". The decision to write literature using the vernacular led indeed to a "new" renaissance of black poetry. The black arts writers were committed to applying the ideas underlying the black power movement to art, the conflict and disagreement were inevitable. The emphasis on group identity, the suppression of individuality, would ultimately constitute stifling conditions for many writers, including Giovanni.

Nikki Giovanni was "the new kid on the block", when the Black Arts Movement was well-established and she got her poems and essays published in little magazines. Giovanni believes that poetry should tell the truth. She wants her poetry to connect her with ordinary people and for Giovanni, *Poetry Is a Trestle* wherein she says: poetry is a trestle/spanning the distance between/what I feel/and what I say"(1-4)

Threaded through her poetry are Giovanni's strong beliefs about racism, sexism, the environment, and the current events. Like all poets, she studies people and chooses her words carefully. She weaves stories about little things. Her poems are clear and direct, with "everything in plain sight", just the way she like it. But the feeling behind words comes straight from Nikki Giovanni's heart. Many of Nikki Giovanni's poems addresses personal subjects, express personal emotions or evoke a mood.

In Giovanni's poem, *On Hearing "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair"*, the poet has clearly elucidated the comparison between the portrayal of a black woman and a white woman. The portrayal can be clearly elucidated through the lines :

His girl has hands soothed with perfumes sweet
 She has lips soft and pink
 My woman's lips burn in midday sun
 My woman's hands - black like ink (5-8).

Through the above quoted lines, we could illuminate the picture of a white woman who lives in luxury and on the other hand, a black woman, who is always confronted to austerity, deprivation, and bad luck. We could find that, the poem (*On Hearing "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair"*) also agitates the individual's desire for an individual identity, and destroys the delicate connections between the individual's small desires and wishes that, provides life with its meaning. The black woman finds herself in a dilemma, wherein she is in a daunting condition to meet her needs of her life. The speaker of the poem (*On Hearing "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair"*), finds herself in a world where love is regarded as - and becomes - a luxury. The poet finds that her woman becomes weak and tired by picking cotton all the day. When night arrives, the woman want off her feet. This idea is illustrated as :

He can make music to please his girl
 Night comes I'm tired and beat
 He can make notes, make her heart beat fast
 Night comes I want off my feet" (9-12)

Denial of a black American's individuality - and hence, humanness - is the core of white racism. A black American also has the urge to have all the freedom that a white American possesses, but the unchanging

fact is that his condition always remains the same to the core. This denial of individuality from both white America and black revolutionaries constitute an intolerable situation for Giovanni. The whites always celebrate the term “nigger” in order to make the blacks inferior. The term “nigger” is an obsolete term and the whites had propounded and exclaimed it as the universal tag for a black baby boy or a baby girl, who had just cherished to this world. The whites could have made any term such as “boy”, “woman”, or “child” as a universalized term for denoting them but they always wish to put them under the tag of a “nigger”. Frantz Fanon in his essay, “The Fact of Blackness” clearly illustrates how whites universalize black as a “nigger”. And there is a instance wherein we could find a white boy throwing himself into his mother’s arms by shouting:

“Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened! Frightened! Frightened! Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up.” (*The Fact of Blackness*)

The whites had always pictured the black as a “negro” who is an animal, who is bad, who is mean, who is ugly and who is a cannibal. The black is always distorted, recoloured and sprawled out in the hands of a white. The black is always expected to act as a black man.

The acceptance of black as “black” and the celebrating of their “blackness” is a great miracle. The blacks are compared to a panther who always step back before attacking its prey and the panther denotes or defines the strengths of the blacks. Through the above mentioned lines we could explicably identify, the black strength and how the poet has compared it to a panther. However the whites try to demolish their courage and make them feel inferior, they will surely advent and re-appear with a “tremendous growl”. Denial of the black individual freedom is also depicted in Giovanni’s poem, *Harvest (for Rosa Parks)*, as :“Colored people couldn’t vote . . . couldn’t use the bathroom in public places . . . couldn’t go to the same library they paid taxes for . . . had to sit on the back of the buses . . . couldn’t live places . . . work places . . . go to movies . . . amusement parks . . . Nothing . . . if you are colored . . .”

And the poet also makes us aware of the fact that a colored individual is always forced to confront the board signs, which loudly cries to them and to their entire clan --- a big “no”. Giovanni quotes the idea from the same poem as: “Just signs . . . always signs . . . saying No . . . No . . . No . . .”

The Great Pax Whitie is one among the best poems in Giovanni's entire oeuvre. Her struggle is a personal search for individual values. The poem has been written in the atmosphere of melancholy, a few weeks after the King's funeral. The poem can be regarded as a perversion. The poem employs biblical allusions from the Genesis, and the poet uses it ironically to depict the pleading and the worst condition that a black man is confronted with. Giovanni jotted down:

In the beginning was the word

And the word was

Death

And the word was nigger

And the word was death to all niggers (1-5)

Thematically, the poem draws light to the history, as one long record of white antagonism against the black people, an antagonism that has repeatedly led to the destruction of the black people. Giovanni skillfully brought out the white strife for accomplishing their superiority through the poem

Racism is the major issue that has been imbibed by Giovanni in all her major works. She outspokenly writes about her feelings and expresses it to the world. Giovanni was the new African American voice that was roaring on top of the media and literature, to help the society in getting rid of racial slurs. Race and racism has become the integral and inescapable part of social history. It is a strategy and a process of social and political control which functions to exclude the opportunities and benefits to certain groups. Racism serves to exclude the diversity of people's lives and rights. In this way racism is similar to patriarchy. The contemporary racism can be regard as a product of American Slavery. Racism was the major issue confronted by the African Americans. The African Americans suffered from ignominy, aspersion and discrimination. They were always made to stand aside by the whites and were extensively excluded from the society. The ongoing circumstances of the African Americans are exquisitely portrayed through Giovanni's poetry.

She is and an enigmatic woman; a visage of perfect stanza, prose, and mastery over the English language. Giovanni's poetry depicts the insightful and unique experiences that she went through, in her whole life. Her poems change with the passage of time. Her poems spring out of herself. It is Giovanni who identifies the fact, that, Blacks are surely America's prime victim and she hopes that they must rise above what is, to,

what can be. The greatest acclaim to Nikki Giovanni is that she writes about the familiar: what she knows, sees and experiences. Through her poetry, Giovanni portrays a very keen sophistication and she addresses a collective experience of the Black clan.

Giovanni uses her revolutionary spirits to wipe out the gender discrimination towards Black woman and to ignite a hope, about a new world, marked by equality. Gendered racism is a form of oppression that occurs because of race and gender, and is traced out from the case of African American women. Women are subject to discrimination sometimes because of their gender roles, and sometimes because they are members of racial or ethnic groups. The situation for women is compounded and sometimes measures are introduced to combat one form of discrimination, but it paradoxically reinforces another. The burden that the Black women bear is multiple in nature. They are under immense pressures not to expose the wider community of the institutional racism, but also, they are unable to seek redress for abuses that take place against them, as women within their communities.

Giovanni believes and feels in complete unison with the nature and the world around; Giovanni sees her world as an extension of herself, she sees problems in the world as an extension of her problems, and she sees herself existing amidst tensions. These experiences make her unravel her revolutionary spirits to people through words. She strongly adheres to the slogan “black is beautiful.” As a writer, Giovanni strongly believed that she has a real, serious commitment to her people and the institutions that are working towards the liberation of the Black people. Through her major collections, the poet illustrates that she clearly recognizes, the personal is political and gives voice to all within the Black Arts Movement that struggle against the institutional racism of liberal humanism, and aesthetics that emphasize fixed notions of identity.

Giovanni demonstrates that Blackness is a process, a space of continual change. The ideas of racial memory and unshakeable knowledge of who we are, where we have been, are the essential focus of Giovanni’s collections. She makes it clear that the self determined concept of Blackness will be politically revolutionary. Her collections are a performative act in which she attempts to shape a radical representation of Blackness, by excluding white considerations.

The paper finds out Nikki Giovanni as a revolutionary poet who possesses self definition, self determination, self defense and self respect. Through her revolutionary poems, Giovanni tries to arouse the

strong feeling of being one with the nation and always tries to teach them to stop looking at themselves as White Americans look at them. Giovanni can be claimed as a revolutionary, in the sense, that her poetry tries to teach the readers to empathize, to feel and more precisely to be human. The poetic revolution which she had ignited however is still persistent, growing across ages, continuing to read, write, speak and teach, remaining undiminished.

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