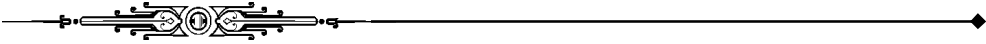




**A STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS
BY NIKKI GIOVANNI**

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Abstract

The paper sheds light on the literary achievement, ideas and inclinations of one of the revolutionary postmodern American poets, Nikki Giovanni (1943-). It presents the Afro-American poet, Nikki Giovanni, her revolutionary temperament and rejection of racial discrimination and discrimination against the woman in poems like “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs Negro,” “Nikki-Rosa,” “Poems for Black Boys” and “A Litany for Peppe.” The poet mirrors her time for its sex and race prejudice, and for its daily violence and unpredictable atrocities. The paper shows her condemnation of America’s political and social racial courses of action through an approach to selected poems as examples.

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We ain't got to prove we can die
We got to prove we can kill...
Learn to kill niggers
Learn to be Black men
Giovanni, "The True Import of
Present Dialogue Black vs. Negro"

Nikki Giovanni (1943-) was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, and reared in Cincinnati, Ohio. She attended Fisk University, where she was a member of a Writers workshop and was instrumental in establishing a chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. She left Fisk University before graduation and returned to Cincinnati, where she plunged into Black Cultural Revolution. By 1967 she arranged a Black Arts Festival, helped to develop a block theatre and was conducting a workshop in black history.¹

Giovanni was one of the revolutionists in the Black Arts Movement (1960s) that rejected "the current American standards of morality, justice, education, social behavior, beauty and aesthetics" and replaced them by "black standards tailored to fit exclusive feelings and needs of the black American subculture."² Giovanni's works had great popular appeal. Like some other poets, she rejected the standard language and thought to find forms and diction more reflective of black realities. Consequently, in both her prose and her poetry she employed a current inner city vernacular and starkly realistic images. Her works are "tough, angry demands

for action.”³ In criticism and in poetry she attempted to find a black aesthetic clearly different from the Euro-American aesthetic. R. Roderick Palmer thinks that Giovanni was “the most polemic, the most incendiary; the poet most impatient for change,”⁴ who thus advocated open violence as stated in the poem “The True Import of Present Dialogue Black vs. Negro”:

Nigger
 Can you kill
 Can you
 Can a nigger kill
 Can a nigger kill a honkie
 Can a nigger kill the Man
 Can you kill nigger
 Huh? nigger can you kill
 Do you know how to draw blood
 Can you poison ...
 A nigger can die
 We ain't got to prove we can die
 We got to prove we can kill ...
 Learn to kill niggers
 Learn to be Black men⁵

Her “Poem for Black Boys” advocates violence and rebellion and states that young black boys should be nurtured in a different way and to ask their mothers not for toys but for guns. Hope for change is in the hands of the young generation:



Ask your mother for a Rap Brown gun
Santa just may comply if you wish hard enough ...

DO NOT SIT IN DO NOT FOLLOW KING
GO DIRECTLY TO STREETS

This is a game you can win ...

And you will understand all too soon

That you, my children of battle, are your heroes

You must invent your own games and teach us old ones
how to play.⁶

In "A Litany for Peppe," Giovanni blesses the blacks who defend their rights promising them of mastering the earth: "Blessed is he who kills/ For he shall control this earth." (ll. 8-9) She says "I wanted to write a poem that rhymes with revolution," as in her lines penned in "For Saundra":

so i thought again
and it occurred to me
maybe i shouldn't write
at all
but clean my gun
and check my kerosene supply
perhaps these are not poetic
times
at all

Although Nikki Giovanni occasionally lent herself to less explosive themes in her two books *Black Judgement* and *Black Feeling, Black Talk*, essentially her main concerns displayed the open revolutionary temperament of the aggressive activist. She had little patience with slow change, and exhorted black Americans to rise up and take arms, for "Blessed be machine guns in Black hands"

as she wrote in “A Litany for Peppe.” (l. 5)

Giovanni became an internationally celebrated and influential writer. From an early age she underwent the sense of displacement when her grandmother was moved by urban renewal. Her involvement with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s brought out militant poetry in poems like “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs Negro.” The poetry written after the seventies focused more on personal relationships and relationships within the black community.⁷ One of her most anthologised, powerful and very poignant poem was “Nikki-Rosa.” The poem highlights the lack of understanding of the deep roots of love and bonding in black families.

Childhood remembrances are always a drag
 if you're black
 You always remember things like living in
 Woodlawn
 with no inside toilet
 and if you become famous or something
 they never talk about how happy you were to
 have your mother all to yourself
 And how good the water felt when you got your
 bath from one of those
 big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in
 (ll. 18-28)

Giovanni here shows that it is not possible for white people to comprehend it, maybe they never will. The true wealth and strength of black people lay in these ties of love regardless of poverty and other deprivations:

... Somehow when you talk about home

it never gets across how much you
 understand their feelings
 as the whole family attended meetings about
 Hollydale
 and even though you remember
 your biographers never understand
 Your father's pain as he sells his stock

.....
 ... I really hope no white person ever has cause to
 write about me
 because they never understand Black love is Black
 wealth and they'll
 probably talk about my hard childhood and never
 understand that
 all the while I was quite happy.

(ll. 20-32)

African American women poets, like Giovanni, through their powerful verse touch the lives of black people and attempt to make Martin Luther King's dream a reality. A remarkable aspect of African American women's poetry is that it has risen above mere black themes to be acknowledged today as one of the best in American poetry. One of the critics believed that:

As social options increase for Black women, their fictional worlds will expand, developing a repertoire of subjects, themes, forms and genres as seemingly boundless as their gifts for poetry and song.⁸

Several political and social forces converge to create the outpouring of African American poetry that has taken place since 1960. These upheavals are the result of civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s which ushered in a dramatic change in the legal and social status of African Americans. The assassination of Martin Luther king, one of the African American leaders of freedom and equality, inspired poets like Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, Sam Allen, Quincy Troupe and Mari Evans to write rebellious and revolutionary poems. The Black Power movement came as a consequence of the urban riots and fires that were the people's response to King's murder with "its bold language of racial confrontation, cultural separation and its insistence upon self-defense, self-reliance and black pride."⁹ The poetic technique emphasises free verse, typographical stylistics, irreverent, often scatological, diction, and linguistic experimentation.¹⁰ Nikki Giovanni is one of the prominent African American poets who undertake this movement. Her use of the four-letter words and other obscenities, the fused word, the small letter "i" and the omission of capital letters and certain punctuation marks are—in themselves—experimentally revolutionary, and befit the poetic utterances of revolutionary writers like Giovanni.¹¹

Gwendolyn Brooks points out that "since 1970s contemporary African American poets have developed a form of communal performance art that draws heavily on [what Stephen Henderson calls] black music and black speech as poetic referents."¹² Giovanni is among those African American poets who discovered how to

“transform the printed poem into a performance that unleashes the elegance and power of black speech and music.”¹³ She achieved national popularity as she wedded her visionary, “truth-telling” poetry with the sounds of gospel music in her best-selling album “Truth Is On Its Way” in 1971.¹⁴

Giovanni does not rebel against, merely, racial discrimination and injustice, but also she rejects woman's dependence and urges her to assert her own identity as in her poem “Woman.” At the beginning of the poem, the narrator is completely dependent upon the man for her identity, but the last stanza that focuses on her independence shows that the woman’s acceptance of her independence becomes the most important part of the poem.

She decided to become
a woman
and though he still refused
to be a man
she decided it was all
right

(ll. 18-23)

Her own unique identity is revealed when she realises that she can be truly dependent only upon herself. The reader begins to understand that perhaps man could not be pleased. Perhaps he refuses to accept his part of the responsibility. His lack of acceptance requires the woman to be the one in charge.¹⁵ She finally accepts her responsibility. This responsibility happens to be the key to understanding her identity.

Giovanni, like her contemporary African American poets, reflects the diverse cultural perspectives and voices. It must be understood, however, that “minority or ethnic voices did not only express criticism of discrimination and injustice but also expressed a culture to celebrate.”¹⁶ What they create in their writings is an awareness of the ills of the society and an environment of tolerance for diversity. Gonzalez, Houston and Chen hold the theoretical view that “race, culture, gender, class and ethnicity” are not

... external variables but rather inherent features in an ongoing process of constructing how we understand and participate in the large, social, cultural and political discourse.¹⁷

America seemed to be, according to the previous quotation, more of a mosaic than a melting pot, more colourful and polyphonic with rich cultural diversity and pluralism.

Moreover, the black writer has been concerned with crucial problems of life, in a physical and moral sense, in a society in which the black life has been the most “expendable commodity.”¹⁸ Giovanni, particularly, promulgates the black aesthetic, revitalises black values and delineates the natural spirit of black people to the end that security, respect and equality should be the foundations of black life.¹⁹ Her poetry, like Sexton’s, although in a different perspective, reflects the search for identity. However, black poetry is celebratory of a life that, despite its hardships and injustice, is often happy.

Conclusion

The study shows that the American poet revolts against current laws and prejudices whether social or racial. Nikki Giovanni expresses her disappointment at the loss of the American Dream of freedom. She used her poetry to express her concerns for man and country as well for the role of the woman in the twentieth century, for the conditions of the black, and for cultural diversity. Her poetry reveals her awareness of the ills of the society and a celebration of diversity. Notwithstanding her disappointment, her poetry conveys her impetus for change, her sensibility and her celebration of American old values.

Notes

- ¹Joyce Patton, "African-American Poets Past and Present: A Historical View," Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1991 (URL: <http://www.yale.edu/ynht/curriculum/units/1991/4/91.04/04/html>), Retrieved on 28th of April, 2007. It is important to mention that this topic, "A Study of Selected Poems by Nikki Giovanni," was a term paper presented in the course of American poetry in the April of 2007 in the College of Arts/ English Dept./ Univ. of Baghdad. I elaborated the paper to be accepted for publication.
- ²R. Roderick Palmer, "The Poetry of Three Revolutionists: Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni," in *Modern Black Poets*, ed., Donald B. Gibson (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1973), p.136.
- ³Patton.
- ⁴Palmer, p.144.
- ⁵Nikki Giovanni, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970), pp.11-2.
- ⁶Nikki Giovanni, *Black Judgement* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968), p.5. Page references to the poems are from this edition.
- ⁷Manohan Samuel, "Deferred Dreams: the Voice of African American Women's Poetry since the 1970s," American Studies (URL://www.brook/americanstudies/today/online/deferred/dreams.htm), Retrieved on 28th of April, 2007.
- ⁸Quoted in Samuel.
- ⁹Joanne V. Gabbin, "Furious Flower: African American Poetry, An overview," *Modern American Poetry* (URL: <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/furious/flower.htm>), Retrieved on 22nd of November, 2006, p.8.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Palmer, p.146.
- ¹²Gabbin.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Ibid.
- ¹⁵Karen Powers Liebhaber, "Identity through Independence in Giovanni's 'Woman,'" Suit 101 (URL:<http://www.suit101.com/profile.cfm/cheetald>), Retrieved on 17th of May 2007.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Ibid.
- ¹⁸Palmer, p.137.
- ¹⁹Ibid.

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المستخلص

(دراسة قصائد مختارة لنيكي جيوفاتي)

يقدم البحث نيكي جيوفاتي (١٩٤٣) الأفريقية الجذور وما لهذه الحقيقة من اسقاطات على تصويرها، ليس لمعاناة السود فقط، بل للرد على عنصرية وإضطهاد البيض. جيوفاتي تكتب عن غضبها لإنتهاك البيض حقوق أبناء جلدتها السود وعن أرادة التغيير لواقع السود المؤلم وتحفزهم للتغيير من الضعف والمهانة الى القوة كما في قصيدتها " الأهمية الحقيقية في الحوار الجار للأسود ضد الزنجي " و "نيكي روزا" و "قصائد للصبية السود" و "صلاة لبيبي". جيوفاتي هي واحدة من الشعراء السود المهمومين بقضايا الحياة الجوهرية ماديا وأخلاقيا. المرأة لها الصدارة في شعرها وكما سيتضح في هذه الدراسة فإن الشاعرة كما تكتب ضد العنصرية العرقية فهي تكتب كذلك ضد العنصرية ضد المرأة.

