

Nikki Giovanni: The Poet Laureate of the Black Community

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Abstract:

Black women have a long history and practise of activism that can be traced to pre-colonial Africa. Women writers of African descents have challenged the status quo of the cultural, political, and spiritual realms of their communities by using their skills to present women who challenge traditional roles and resist attacks of oppression. The paper deals with the suffering of women in general and black women specifically. The aim of the study is to give a voice to black women through Nikki Giovanni's poetry, whom is considered the poets' laureate. Her poems are like weapons against the oppressors. Using a cross-cultural analysis, will give voice to women who had long been silenced and devalued; women who, according to Zora Neale Hurston, "have the status of a mule".

Keywords: Black voice, Harlem Renaissance, African American, Identity, Black Women, Strong Voice, Civil Rights.

Introduction:

The research paper explores the different aspects of suffering of women in general and being a black woman in specific. Those women intend to search for identity and wholeness and spirituality through their writings. By doing so they seek a kind of healing for their body and spirit by reconciling the past with the present, the mythical and the real. This flourishing of black poetry was called Harlem Renaissance; it is the golden age for African American writers. It included musicians, artists and black women poets. This movement started between 1910-1930s. (<https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/harlem>)

Strong, black voice:

At some point during the late 1960s, black poetry reached a tipping point. No fewer than sixty anthologies featuring African American verse appeared between 1965 and 1976 alone. African American women poets like Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor. they published widely during the Harlem Renaissance and have been extraordinarily fruitful since the 1970s (William, 2007, p.33).

The overgrowth of the black experience gave these artists pride to represent the American culture and set the stage for the civil rights movement. A huge number of African-American poets are known for critical success, their images and

words were published in magazines. In addition, their voices were resounded with the jazz music and gospel choirs. Since they are known for forceful poetry, they were often imbued with a radical, Black Nationalist vibe. The literary history of Black American women poets had a beginning in the work of Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley and Michael S. (Jain, 2017, p.209).

Literature by African American women is important for its artistic characteristics, and it also focuses on the social issues that they themselves suffered from. African American women writers have made an enormous contribution to American culture and the African women embrace and sides African American women writers and vice versa. Bessie Head, for example, the south African writer, had established friendships with several African American writers, including Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Nikki Giovanni. The president of the Organization of Women Writers of Africa Jayne Cortez, asserts that "Black women writes from around the globe have been struggling against racism, exploitation, gender oppression, and other human rights violations" (Cortez, 2004, p. 36)

One of the African- American famous poets is Yolande Cornelia "Nikki" Giovanni Jr. (1943); a writer, commentator, activist, and educator. She in her writings, includes various themes like identity race, social issues and racial discrimination. She also wrote for children. She has been a great influential voice; "I can Kill.....I can encourage others to kill"(Giovanni, 1970, p.54). Her strong voice has been a social and political cry for the black community. Giovannie and other black women came forward and raised revolutionary voice against injustice in their society, and dealt mainly with issues like racism and sexism in their poems. Giovanni's rebel included racial discrimination, injustice and called for women's independence. That issue was important for her, for she was raised at a time in which women had no rights in a masculine society. Once Giovanni declared: "What can I a poor Black woman, do to destroy america? / This is a question, with appropriate variations, being asked/ in every Black heart. There is one answer—I can kill. There/is one compromise—I can encourage others to kill. There are no/other ways."(Giovanni, 1970, p.54), Truly she suffered not as a woman only but mostly as being black.

'Nikki-Rose':

One of Giovannie's influential poems is "Nikki-Rose". The poem highlights the importance of deep roots of love and bonding in black families. The poem is important for Giovannie as she says:

"... the reason why I write, why I speak, why spoken word. It's so important for us to be the tellers of our own stories; because only then would they be as authentic as we are. And by 'we' I don't mean just Black people; I mean all human being. I wholeheartedly believe in autobiographies. And I don't care much for biographies. This is a powerful poem from a very powerful lady! And the inspiration behind my poem, Autobiography" (Giovanni, 1970,p.15).

The poem begins as such:

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 (Line, 1-8)

The poem explores the speaker's memories of growing up in the black district of Cincinnati, reflecting the happy moments with her family and her community. The speaker describes details of their simple happy life thence, saying:

how good the water felt when you got your bath
from one of those
big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in
and somehow when you talk about home
it never gets across how much you
understood their feelings
as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
(Line, 9-15)

Anyone can see how white people depict the black Americans, as poor and miserable. Accordingly, the speaker rejects such shallow prototype portrait. Instead, she shows the powerful love social ties in a black family in a black community way of life. The real happiness is that when you can spend much time with your mother; it is just the two of you, or when you take a bath in a big metal tub. In Chicago, however, it is used for barbecue. The white people satirize the blacks for not having a private toilet. Poverty never bothers the speaker, happy life for her is what shapes the black identity:

your father's pain as he sells his stock
and another dream goes
And though you're poor it isn't poverty that
concerns you
and though they fought a lot
it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together and you
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmases (Line: 16-24)

The white people do not recognize the positive qualities of the black speaker's early childhood because they assume that if someone grows up as black and poor, this can only mean that his life is filled with suffering.

and 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 (Line: 25-31)

The speaker really sees the beauty of her simple life, and refuses to be judged by ridiculous white people, for she is sure that they are going to ignore the importance of the black community's close family relationships and social ties and only concentrate on the black hardships. Depicting, thus, a negative reflecting image of their life.

'Nikki Rose' as a title is derived from 'Rosa Parks', the park that witnessed the first black strike for black freedom. The story goes back to 1955 in Alabama, when a black woman refused to give her seat to a white person on a bus which was considered a custom in that time (Bennet, 1969, p.315). Rosa was a girl with different 'color of your skin made a difference in society' ('Rosa Parks' line, 6) and that how the story starts: 'In a bus, in the city of Montgomery,/A woman came aboard./Little did anyone know at the time,/That this woman would change the world' ('Rosa Parks' line, 1-4). She refused to give her bus seat to a white man, which is a common sense in America for a black man or woman should stand to give his seat to a white person, the time she refused, her "... actions started a very important movement, / In the history of African Americans./ It sparked a revolution for equality,/ And so the civil rights movement began." ('Rosa Parks' line, 17-20).

'Rose' the name in the title of the poem of 'Rosa Parks', is connected to the idea of rejecting an old racist tradition which abuse physically and spiritually black people just because of their skin colour. Black people find the meaning of happiness and wealth different from the white. Giovanni rejects, "the current American standards of morality, justice, education, social behaviour, beauty and aesthetics" and replaces them by "black standards tailored to fit exclusive feelings and needs of the black American subculture" (Palmer, 1973, p.136).

'The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs Negro'

Nikki Geovanni has a dramatic style; she lets her readers see the other side of being minority or poor. It is that style that makes her as an international influential poet. Her participation with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, gave birth to a new type of aggressive poetry like "The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs Negro". Her poetry that are written after the seventies concentrate more on personal relations and relationships within the black community ([URL://www.brook/americanstudies/today/online](http://www.brook/americanstudies/today/online)).

The question of giving names for the Black American people is a sensitive issue connection with power and identity. The first time, the Africans were brought to America, they were stripped of their actual names and had names imposed by

their masters. In the 1960s a new black power appeared, the Black Art Movement, which sought for their identity through art. Terms like 'nigger', 'negro' & 'Black' are usually used in a more inferior way to describe African Americans. ([Nikki Giovanni \(lorenwebster.net\)](#) Sarah Webster Fabio wrote a definitive essay on this topic for 'Negro Digest' magazine, in which she offered the following analysis:

Scratch a Negro and you will find a nigger and a potential black man; scratch a black man and you may find a nigger and the remnants of a Negro. Negro is a psychological, sociological, and economical fabrication to justify the status quo in America. Nigger is the tension created by a black man's attempt to accommodate himself to become a Negro in order to survive in a racist country. Black is the selfhood and soul of anyone with one drop of black blood, in America, who does not deny himself (Fabio, 1968, pp.286-287).

“The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro” encourages black people to cast-off their middle-class satisfaction and create an angry revolutionary soul to gain liberation for the black community. In her poetry Giovanni endeavour to find a black artistic way that is clearly different from the Euro- American art.

R. Roderick Palmer thinks that Giovanni is “the most polemic, the most incendiary; the poet most impatient for change,” (Palmer, 1973, p.144) who thus encourages open violence as stated in the poem:

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 men

(Giovanni, 1970, p. 11)

The poem shows the different titles that was common among black people during the civil rights movements of the 1960s; 'negro', for the bourgeois mentality and 'black' for the revolutionaries. Giovanni asserts that the revolutionaries are the only group that will give a bright future for the black youth. Her poems are "tough, angry demands for action" (Palmer, 1973, p.144).

Can you piss on a blond head
 Can you cut it off
 Can you kill
 A nigger can die
 We ain't got to prove we can die
 We got to prove we can kill
 They sent us to kill
 Japan and Africa
 We policed Europe
 Can you kill
 Can you kill a white man
 Can you kill the nigger in you
 Can you make your nigger mind die
 Can you kill your nigger mind
 And free your black hands to strangle

According to Giovanni, adopting a revolutionary attitude is the only way, to save the black identity by becoming angry enough to kill. killing in the sense of rejecting actions, habits, and values that have kept black people enslaved. It is a metaphorically means of resistance. These include certain religious practices, economic habits, and behavioural actions that the black people must 'kill' if they seek freedom from continual subjugation by the white community. So she keeps repeating:

Can you kill
 Can a nigger kill
 Can you shoot straight and
 Fire for good measure
 Can you splatter their brains in the street
 Can you kill them
 Can you lure them to bed to kill them
 We kill in Viet Nam
 for them
 We kill for UN & NATO & SEATO & US
 And everywhere for all alphabet but BLACK
 Can we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK
 Learn to kill niggers
 Learn to be Black men

The repetition of “Can You Kill”; is a reflection the repeated cruelty of the whites. In this poem, even the language used has a direct message. The poem shows that those whites use the blacks to kill for them in Vietnam, and in NATO, & SEATO, yet they marginalise them and deny their rights as humans and treat them as an inferior race. Since they are being treated in a harsh way, so Giovannie

uses violent language to urge blacks to take action. This is summed up in the last two lines: “Learn to kill niggers/ Learn to be Black men.”

African American women poets, like Giovanni, with her powerful dramatic words' lines touch the lives of black community and intends 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.

Giovanni is an icon, powerful voice, what she believes, she wrote it as a title of her first book, “Feeling Black, Black Talk,”. It is her black talk that she calls in it for their black Rights. Her voice expands calling for injustice and the right for 'vote', and from here came the idea of writing the poem below.

'Vote'

It's not a hug, or a toy at Christmas
 It's not a colored egg at Easter
 Or a bunny hopping across the meadow
 It's a vote, saying you are a citizen

Giovanni calls for doing something serious, for the black community. The issue she is calling for is not a mere toy at Christmas, nor about an Easter egg, it is a call for voting and asserts “I don't care who you vote for”, Just vote. Voting means you are a citizen and you have rights to demand for. By doing so she is accused for encouraging anger against white Americans. Actually, she is reflecting how black American people are marginalized and not considered as citizens as their peers of the white Americans.

Though sometimes it is traveling and sometimes a no.
 It can be male or female
 It can be right or left
 I can disagree
 But I am a citizen

She believes to vote; it means that you exist and alive. She refuses to be silenced by others simply because of being different in skin colour. She shouts loudly they cannot silence our black voice; and it is part of their civil rights.

I should be able to vote from prison
 I should be able to vote from the battlefield
 I should be able to vote when I get my driver's license
 I should be able to vote when can I purchase a gun
 When I'm in the hospital
 Or the old folk's home
 Or if I need a ride to the polling place
 I am a citizen

Here Giovannie shows how cruelly they are being treated harshly, they cannot have a driving license, they suffer to purchase a gun, they are being treated

as inferior to the whites in hospitals, schools, public places and everywhere. Here they have to put an end by showing they have not just a voice, but a strong voice to call for their rights. Accordingly, voting is not just a mere vote, it means they are alive and have the right to live decently. Voting means they exist and others must listen to their needs. Because simply those black people are citizens in the same country of the whites and they have rights to live equally.

I must be able to vote.

Folks were lynched

Folks were shot.

Folks communities were gerrymander

Folks who believed in the Constitution were lied to

Burned out, bought and sold because

They agreed that all men and women were created equal.

Folks vote to make us free

It's not cookies or cake

But it is icing that is so sweet

Good for us, my country tis of thee.

The ability to vote is the first step to their right path, it means stop shooting the blacks without reason, stop treating blacks as slaves, all people in the world generally and in America specifically. Simply voting sets them free, and it is for the best of All.

Nikki Giovanni is able to transform the black power into a brilliant art, using it to defend the black case. Her major themes throughout most of her poems is the suffering of the black community due to suppression and marginalization of their role in the society (Krishna, 2019, p.427).

Most of her short revolutionary poems, deal with the Black community issues that shows their heritage from blues and humiliation suffering of her people and illuminate all these matters in her poems. Giovanni tries strongly to show how blacks should stop looking at themselves like the whites look at them. They have their own colour, troubles, traditions, heritage, and identity, which gives them the right to live it as they want with the respect of the others especially whom live with them in the same nation. Simply, because God created all human equal.

Conclusion

The study shows that the African American poets of the Harlem Renaissance revolted against current laws and prejudices whether social or racial. In such poems as '*Nikki-Rose*', '*The Import of Present Dialogue, Black Vs. Negro*' and '*Vote*'; she tries to revive the national spirit of the Afro-American people and lead them to be proud of their race and of their colour. She tries to preserve the black identity through reviving the African American habits, culture and social relationships. She uses these things as a counter hegemony against the oppression of the white race.

In an attempt to agitate the awareness of her fellow citizens and encourage them to take action, Nikki Giovannie adopts a dramatic style. For her, freedom,

human rights and justice cannot realize through passive resistance. 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 variety. Notwithstanding her disappointment, her poetry conveys a push for change, her sensibility and her celebration of American old values.

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نكي جوفاني: الشاعرة المتوجة للمجتمع الاسود

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الملخص

النساء السود لديهن تاريخ عريق بنشاطاتهن، الذي يعود الى ما قبل الاستعمار للقارة الافريقية. الكاتبات نوات أصول أفريقية قد تحداوا الاوضاع مجتمعاتهم الثقافية والسياسية والروحية، باستخدام مهارتهن فيقدمن نساء يتحدين الأدوار التقليدية ويقاومن هجمات القمع. العمل يقدم لنا صورة للمعناة المرأة بشكل عام والنساء السود بشكل خاص، وافضل صوت يمثل المرأة هة صوت الكاتبة نكي جوفاني التي توجهها شعبها ممثل لهم بقدرتها الكتابية، فقصائدها كسلاح ضد الاعداء. و بأستخدام نظرية التحليل متعدد الثقافات فيعطي صوتا للنساء اللاتي تعرضن للتمييز وصمتهم لفترة طويلة والتقليل من شأنهم. هؤلاء النساء اللواتي، لقبوا من قبل زورا نيل هيرستون ، "لديهن وضع البغل": أي عنيدات الارادة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصوت الأسود، نهضة هارلم، أميركي من أصل أفريقي، هوية، نساء سوداوات، صوت قوي، حقوق مدنية.