



REVIEW ARTICLE

RACE-CONSCIOUSNESS IN SELECTED POEMS BY NIKKI GIOVANNI

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ABSTRACT

Most of the inventive efforts offered by African American writers are to be located on the level of self-preservation and the attempt to regulate themselves where they are denied, in the society, and to complaint due to the secondary position of persons of African ancestry through their history in America. One of the great poets of African American descent was Nikki Giovanni who was capable of transforming Black Power into amazing Black Art using this art for the sake of defending herself and people due to her race-consciousness. A consciousness about the oppression and subjugation the black are facing in the community they are living in. It's the consciousness that led her have self-esteem and protest against all the types of oppression classifying them as non-human and rejected. Besides black women often got liminal position in actuality and they attempt to struggle for black self-fortitude and rambling against sexist oppression. Known as "the Princess of Black Popularity", Giovanni is considered as one of the premier of twentieth century African American poets who defended herself, race as well as gender being woman, black and black-woman.

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INTRODUCTION

"Poetry is the art of meaning carried to a high order...it is a total communication"

Markstrand, *Meditation on the Nature of Creativity*

Upcoming "from a long line of storytellers" Nikki Giovanni (1943-) who is deliberated one of the preeminent celebrated African American poets, shaped poetry of a strong racial superiority and family esteem. She was born in 1943, in Knoxville, Tennessee, and she is one of the principal black poets of the New Black Renaissance. Her early poetry was branded by being revolutionary reverberated between unsophisticated politically and socially; and being defiant with a threat.<sup>1</sup> Giovanni was America's most opinionated and politically cognizant poet and a member of "The Black Arts Movement", the thing that enlarged her popularity and made her "poet of the people."<sup>2</sup> Having a full knowledge and awareness of black history and community, such were the central themes of her poetry. In her "The Great Pax Whitie" she strained to reply to the climate of the late sixties politically and racially. She says:-

The genesis was life  
The genesis was death  
In the genesis of death  
Was the genesis of war  
be still peace be still.<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious that the poem lacks punctuation, it has been written in an unusual syntax and experiential structure. The uniqueness of the style reflects that of an orator.<sup>4</sup> Giovanni's concern for racism is through her recurrent orientations to the dilemma of the black woman by being very powerful and compassionate in dealing with pain and triumphs of her life. For example in "Poem for a Lady Whose Voice I Like" she honors the singer Lena Home by defending her racist annotations. She says: "god created heaven and earth / and all that's Black within them."<sup>5</sup> The narrator In this poem presents a female character who is being demeaned by a privileged "he," saying

you ain 't got no talent  
if you didn't have a face  
you wouldn't be nobody.<sup>6</sup>

To disprove this male's scorns The female retold the story of creation from a woman's standpoint, that is hers. Proving herself stronger and accomplished figure through the final comment she brands "show me someone not full of herself/ and I'll show you a hungry person."<sup>7</sup> And it has been made in a

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response to what the man utters "you pretty full of yourself ain'tchu" for it is an allegation steadily used to abate women, who are never conceived to be full of themselves.<sup>8</sup> The merriment of black women handled differently in "The Genie in the Jar", the celebration of Nina Simone, a singer who is obliged to sing and play the piano in order to upkeep her family however she was qualified at Juilliard. The Arabian derived genie figure and is joined with the fairy tale about leaping Beauty. The essence of the story is that the genie figure is prisoned in a jar in the Arabian Folklore, and at the same time she can grant wishes once bidden. Besides and in Giovanni's poem conversely the jar is a kind of protection for the genie, it is also in the earlier etymologically meant "genius", a music maker. She surfaces her music "from the Black loom", and must be cautioned against "pricking" her finger":

take the genie and put her in a jar  
     put her in a jar  
     wrap the sky around her  
 take the genie and put her in a jar  
     wrap the sky around her  
     listen to her sing  
     sing a Black song our Black song  
     from the Black loom  
     singing to me  
     from the Black loom  
     careful baby  
 don't prick your finger.<sup>9</sup>

Giovanni was the African American voice to aid the society to get rid of racial disgraces by thriving on top of the media and literature. The year 1943 where she was born, perceived the early years of the Civil Rights Movement and she beheld things like Jim Crowism and de jure segregation. Later she was accepted at the Fisk university and contributed in revitalizing the university's Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as a remark of her embracement of her black distinctiveness.<sup>10</sup> Passing through such involvements Giovanni shaped her poetry as obviously in "Nikki Rosa." The poem is poised of thirty three lines with no punctuation and capitalization. In the poem the poet unswervingly speaks to her spectators being a female right from the beginning of the poem but not a black one till the second line of the poem. She places, at the beginning of the poem, the negative examples of the speaker's recollections from her childhood with those affirmatives and benefits that had been disremembered by "they"

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 became 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 tubes the folk in Chicago barbecue.<sup>11</sup>

The poem is offered for black reception for the poet is chatting about what is constructive and deleterious in her life showing how far the constructive ones compensated the deleterious ones. And because of her frustrating, she envisions the audience to be black, yet still the success for both, black and white. Reeves, a critic, ponders the poem to presence "not a

soliloquy; this is not an ironic poem aimed at a general audience, this is a revolutionary poem meant to arouse one particular group."<sup>12</sup> Its sense of revolt embodying the presentation of the theme of Black love is Black wealth. Obviously it is a concept only in the purview of the black for the sake of building unity or pride in the midst of the black readers. Then the "they" in the poem refers to critics and biographers because she ruminates "the whole concept of the black experience is completely foreign" and to whom she plainly states:

I really hope no white person ever has cause  
 to write about me  
 because they never understand  
 Black love is Black wealth<sup>13</sup>

So "they" in the poem would never understand the lack of an "inside toilet" and fail to mention the worm baths given in "one of those/ big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in " and those critics will " never talk about how happy you were to have your mother/ all to yourself."<sup>14</sup> Critics would remark to the bad things, like her drinking father and the fight of her parents, which is a misapprehension appealing to her, but they'll oversight the closeness of the protracted family, for they will see " that everybody is together and you/ and your sister have happy birthdays and very good circumstances."<sup>15</sup> Consequently, what is going to be seen is the poverty of the family and not the richness of the solid, compassionate family. They cannot comprehend that "Black love is Black wealth." Due to this motive alone, the poet hopes that " no white person ever has cause to write about me." To those critics "I'll/ probably talk about my hand childhood and never and never understand that/ all the white I was quite happy."<sup>16</sup> For they would choose the hardships but oversight the love.

Such memories of the past are jumbled together through the very brilliant style of Giovanni which is void of any punctuation making the poem move fluently as if someone would remember his or her youth. It mimics the thought process of the narrator by its formless nature of presenting simple and direct images from a working -class settings that portrays a day- to- day family life.<sup>17</sup>

Actually, an opposite between two people group's involvements, as has been placed by Giovanni in this poem, is not for saying that, the other group, the whites are incapable of reading her poetry and evaluate it, but she pursues delivering utterly black literature. For a "muted" culture, a literature they can only read on the surface level rather than delve deep within as the first group can do, the blacks.<sup>18</sup> Besides the reader distinguishes that she is black woman, because at the beginning she declares herself as a woman only, through those recollections she talked about and her affirming that she does not need any white man to read her works or to write about her due to the fact that she already recognizes the result. Here, concerning race, there is a kind of parallel to her refusal to the Black Arts and Black Power Movements only since they are male-dominated movements, even of the similar race, that's why she desires only females to write about her. Such denotes her identity as a Black woman.<sup>19</sup> The poet also through her style and the structure used by her, she tried to "establish art / prescribe to a "black literature."<sup>20</sup> She writes with lack of grammatical conventions, that is to say lack of punctuation marks and capitalizing things only where her devotion lie and to show a specific message to a specific reader like "Black",

"Woodland" and "Holly dale." This is of course to solidify her affiliation in Black culture. The title "Nikki Rosa" designates the amalgamation of personal life with public or political one and denotes the evolution of a radical, from the girl Nikki to the combative Rosa, alluding to Rosa Parks, a civil rights activist. The poem spoken to the black audiences and not white ones because there are mutual experiences that would be far-off to "white middle-class audiences.

The female subject in "Life Cycles" is recognized as the underdog, the low and the marginal, affirming that her presence:

like some unwanted child  
too late for an abortion  
was to be born  
alone.<sup>21</sup>

Then the poet appears to move to another group to talk to, women. She ponders them as marginalized when she categorizes the seed top in the subject closet.<sup>22</sup> Here in this poem she evidently detects herself as a black woman having strong feelings that the "she" or woman is handled by reason of her womanhood, the color of her skin and her belonging to a black-female community. The emotions she got that "she wasn't one/ of life's winners", "sit[ing] with silence/ in the dark" and "sneaking drinks"<sup>23</sup> are emotions of sorrow which is not an infrequent state for the black woman,<sup>24</sup> consequently the emotions are to go profound, triply lured as black, female, and black-female. Then at last she got an enlightened voice to talk after the quietness which notes a life which is new and a new growth opportunity, the act of "talking back"<sup>25</sup>

she had so many private habits  
she would masturbate sometimes  
she always picked her nose when upset  
she liked to sit with silence  
in the dark  
sadness is not an unusual state  
for the black woman...<sup>26</sup>

Here, the orientation to the habits that are disgraceful when experienced by women like masturbation or blurred or sordid like picking one's nose is to juxtapose the putative notion of a middle-class woman and the female attitude which prescribe and restrain women to that mold-women were obliged to do things and devices they despise like:

she took to sneaking drinks  
a habit which displeased her  
both for its effects  
and taste.<sup>27</sup>

Being obliged shows a meaning of the reluctantly they do such devices which is a highlighting to their being relegated and muted women, a habit which is very common to insignificant groups or non-principal as women.<sup>28</sup> Thus being reluctantly lay open to such mechanisms, the "she" or the woman in the poem found herself exceptional or living the exceptionality of the experience of being in an unexperienced, un-understood, and not that recognized place by males. So such an experience, of the wild zone, added to the woman's exceptional culture, being detached and mute, and aids her to have the legitimacy of owing a culture. This is due to the fact that the wild zone signifies, from the spatial standpoint, no

man's land, a place prohibited to men and it is off limits to women. And from the empirical standpoint, it embodies the facets of the female life-style which are entirely diverse from those of men.<sup>29</sup> The exemplification of the wild zone in "Life Cycles" is not a substance of subject of the poem but as a substance of regarding the male-dominated English language. It is not the advantage of race and gender allowing for the black women as "second sex", the Other, but also, being the last, the most burdened, the most marginalized and the most diverse race.<sup>30</sup>

Besides in both poems "Nikki Rosa" and "Life Cycles" the utterer is not only female or black, rather is a black-female. Consequently, here there is a "cultural authority" the entity that arises from only an insider, thus Giovanni exceeds her "enforced experience of embodiment" through both decreeing and implementing her identity and affiliation as within the furthest muted cultures. Doing so, writing with a triple voice, she vexed to give the muted cultures of black females, adistinctiveness, a voice capable of concealing the issue of subordination and subdue the misunderstanding of "they" founded in "Nikki Rosa" and the prearranged type of women in "Life Cycles"<sup>31</sup> One of Giovanni's crossed poems is "Reflections on April 4, 1968" in which she requests a question and she responds with multiple questions:

What can I, a poor woman, do to destroy america?  
...There is one answer--- I can kill. There  
is one compromise—I can protect those who kill. There is  
one cop-out---I can encourage others to kill. There are no  
other ways.<sup>32</sup>

Such is to display how the discrepancies were strong in the 1960's in America: discrepancies in assumed American belief in democracy and the very unconcealed gap between practice and belief.<sup>33</sup> The determination of being with full confidence, powerful, and capable of attaining any aim by associating her ancestry and prospective to ancient civilization that are significant in their role in modern life, is so flawless and dominant in "Ego Tripping", first published in 1972 in a collection of poetry entitled *My House*. The poet replicates a feeling of black pride where she rejoices being black and female. The poem displays a very distinguishing style by avoiding punctuation marks endorsing strength as well as power. Though it is not the poem's purpose, yet the title advocates an ego so large that the author is tripping over it. It was in 1972 that she first journeyed to Africa, the year of the publication of the poem. Much of the modern life finds its roots in the ancient civilizations, and Giovanni exasperated to bring into line herself with such beginnings. In the first stanza, Giovanni revealed that she was born in the Congo. She conceives herself a female god, very strong and powerful claiming that the sphinx and the pyramids are her formations. That is to say she senses herself in authority of the great wonders of the world, like the Sphinx and Pyramids and being alike to a star that gleams a divine light.:

I was born in the Congo  
I walked to the Fertile Crescent and built  
The Sphinx  
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star  
That only glows every one hundred years falls  
Into the center giving divine perfect light.<sup>34</sup>

Then she finishes her stanza with "I am bad", which should not be assumed literally but on the 1970's slang connotation "I

am awesome." The perseverance of this line is to display how proud the poet was of her individuality and her accomplishment.<sup>35</sup> In the second stanza she associates herself to Nefertiti. The poet preserves on talking about her endeavors and launches herself as a goddess, the mother of Nefertiti. The name allows connotation in relation to its meaning which is the beautiful and perfect woman:

My oldest daughter is Nefertiti  
The tears from my birth pains  
Created the Nile  
I am a beautiful woman.<sup>36</sup>

Such connotation is to be highlighted in the final line of the stanza "I am a beautiful woman." The purpose here is to launch herself as a female, a female fully self-possessed, and confident about herself and the identity she got being a woman and how far she is satisfied of that. Then the poet persisted in the following stanza claiming herself to unmatched power and gods and goddesses of great strength like Hannibal and Noah; here there is a solidification to her supremacies, recounting in details the responsibilities that have been fairly simple and kin to her with grander speed, strength and power. At that point she mentioned to the fact that she cannot be overpowered unlike the great leaders of Rome and Greece actually she exceeded them because she spoke about her son as Noah and Newark, N., J., the city that agonized from being agitated from inside.<sup>37</sup>

My son Noah built New/ Ark and  
I stood proudly at the helm  
As we sailed on a soft summer day  
I turned myself into myself and was  
Jesus.<sup>38</sup>

The reference to Noah and his journey to preserve mankind got additional perception here by Giovanni. She mentions his ship as "New Ark" which has so many implications. It is the place where Amiri Baraka was born, the black American Dramatist who was apart from being poet, novelist and dramatist, he was a political avant-garde and extensively esteemed by Giovanni. He contributed in the Black Arts Repertory Theatre which he originated in Harlem in 1958 to the black writers to produce their works. His involvement indirectly declared by Giovanni in her saying "My son Noah built New/ Ark." Another representation for Newark is that it was the site of six days of racially established rioting in 1967 that thrills the city entirely. For after the riots, many white inhabitants moved to the outskirts and that black inhabitants were given the first time a voice in politics. It was an uprising against harassment.<sup>39</sup> Apparently, on the surface meaning, she seems to be vain, yet the deep meaning of the poem, replicate the fact that the poet tries to give instances about the way she senses about herself and contemplates the reader should do too. "Ego Tripping" is a poem that rejoices black-womanhood and advanced them, the girls the poem formerly written for, "with the power to (re)make history."<sup>40</sup>

I sowed diamonds in my backyard  
My bowels deliver uranium  
The fillings from my finger nails are  
Semi-precious Jewels  
On a trip north  
I caught a cold and blew  
My nose giving oil to the Arab world.<sup>41</sup>

Giovanni in the poem tried modify the waste products of everyday life—bowel movements, finger nail clippings, and mucus—into possessions, an overturn of the racialized and gendered opposition historically anticipated onto black women's bodies. Consequently, in this case, she transforms the black women from a sheer disposable laborer into one who constructs the wealth of the nation and the world with her body, into women whom the world's riches are situated right within her. She overturns the wealth of the world and pinpoints it within her body in a very frisky sardonic and overconfident way. It is something that motivates the black women when listening to the new account of the origin of the wealth of the world to smile. The narrator in the poem boasts:

for a birthday presents when he was three  
I gave my son Hannibal an elephant  
he gave me Rome for mother's day  
My strength flows ever on.<sup>42</sup>

Here lies disdain in which white men who are traditionally cast in the characters of great historical figures. Then arises the black men as another source of disdain who endeavored during the Black Art Movement to limit the voices of the black women. The Black women are cast as Gods:

I turned myself into myself and was  
Jesus  
Men intone my loving name  
All praises all praises  
I am the one who would save.<sup>43</sup>

Here she makes fun of the hegemony of western and black nationalist religious oratory. By restating historical accounts with black women as main figures, she attempts at showing portrayal of emotional disobedience in which she claims moral superiority, "indicate [ing] [her] refusal to obey sexist norms and constrains."<sup>44</sup> It is so obvious that Giovanni's "Ego Tripping" is a public and politically sensible work to inspire black women to "revise the terms in which they view themselves, so that they can move, at least psychologically, from the margin to center."<sup>45</sup> Race consciousness is to be seen in another poem of Giovanni, "Quilting the Black-Eyed Peas." In this poem the poet remind the reader that the ancestors of modern African-Americans experience got the involvement of travelling "to another planet" and that NASA specialists should recommend with black Americans on how to overawed a great dread of the indefinite and manage with a sense of solitude and estrangement:

When we go to Mars ... it's the same  
thing ... it's Middle Passage  
When the rocket red glares the astronauts  
will be able to see themselves pull away  
from Earth ... as the ship goes deeper they  
will see a sparkle of blue ... and then one day  
not only will they not see Earth ... they won't  
know which way to look ... and that is why  
NASA needs to call Black America

They need to ask us: How did you calm your fears ...<sup>46</sup>

They should also ask:

How were you able to decide you  
were human even when everything said you

were not ...How did you find the comfort in the face of the improbable to make the world you came to your world ...<sup>47</sup>

And the answer is to be assumed by the poet herself on behalf of her people highlighting the part of music and food as a base for persistence in situations never the less aggressive:

You will  
need a song...take some Billie Holiday  
for the sad days and Charlie Parker for  
the happy ones but always keep at least one  
good Spiritual for comfort...You will need a  
slice or two of meat loaf and if you can man-  
age it some fried chicken in a shoebox with  
a nice moist lemon pound cake...a bottle of  
beer because no one should go that far.<sup>48</sup>

Music in this case is exemplified by Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker, the jazz giants who stand for melancholy and elemental spontaneity correspondingly. They represent the African American musical countenance. Music in this situation indicates food for the soul as food is essential in the literal sense.<sup>49</sup> In her "Revolutionary Dreams" published in *Re-Creation* volume (1970) in *Collected Poetry* she wrote about building a revolution, that transpass streets into the hearts and minds of people, saying:

I used to dream militant dreams  
of take nover american to show  
these white folks  
how it should bedone

.....  
then I awoke and dug  
that if I dreamed natural  
dreams of being a natural  
woman doing what a woman  
does when she's natural

I would have a revolution.<sup>50</sup>

It seems that Giovanni was intentionally aware of her race, color and gender to the degree that she became captivated with her people, she wrote in her "But Since You Finally Asked" :

No one asked us...what we thought of Jamestown...in 1619

.....  
No one said a word...in 1776...to us about Freedom

.....  
No one says..."what I like about your people"...then tricks off  
the wonder of the wonderful things...we've given...Our song  
to God, Our strength to the  
Earth... our unfailing belief in forgiveness...

.....  
I am proud to be a Black American...I am proud  
that my people labored honestly...with forbearance and  
dignity...I am proud that we believe...as no other people  
do...that all equal in

His sight...we didn't write a constitution... We live one...We  
didn't say "Wethe People"... we are one...<sup>51</sup>

"But Since You Finally Asked", was written in the tenth anniversary of the slave memorial at Mount Vernon that the poem rejoices. It is the gallantry of the black history that the poem venerates in a very thoughtful style, the poem ends:

We didn't write a constitution...We live one ...We didn't  
have to add...as an after- thought..."Under God"...we turn our  
faces to the rising sun...knowing... a New Day...is  
always...beginning.<sup>52</sup>

## Notes

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## Conclusion

In many of Nikki Giovanni's poems there is an examination as well as a depiction of women's lives. There is also a celebration of women—Black women in specific—in an attempt to afford a remedy to the disgraces of ten cast upon them. Giovanni offers a very over confident celebration in her poetry, especially through here normously widely held "Ego Tripping (there may be are as on why)" more than any other poet wrote in the same topic which is one of the most potent celebrations of the Black woman ever written, in which she attributes to the Black woman the formation fall the great Civilizations of the world. Giovanni in most of her works urges that one is not beashamed of afacet of identity over which he has no control like race, color or gen-der, only because the world in which he/she lives in uses them as bases for oppression. She severely discards the notion that the victimis in authority of his/her own oppression. Instead, she embraces her gender, her race as well as color and, in her poems she offers her own meaning and portrayal of the Black woman which is unique.

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