

Rebellious Black Femininities in the Select Poems of Nikki Giovanni

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Abstract

Rebelliousness in Nikki Giovanni's Poetry attempts to show how Nikki Giovanni has combined private with public concerns, and her development has been toward the exploration of the inner life of one black female - herself - as a paradigm for black women's aspirations in contemporary America. An individualist who early admired Ayn Rand's concept of rational self-interest, Giovanni has a unique black identity. Her example of self-actualization embodied in her poetry has been not only influential but also inspirational, especially to black youth. Her impact on African American literature was immediate and electric. Her celebration of blackness and her militancy placed her in the avantgarde of black letters. Hailed as the Princess of Black Poetry, she began touring the United States, lecturing to college audiences, spreading her message of black cultural nationalism, "ego-tripping," and love.

Key Words: Rebelliousness, black identity, Nikki Giovanni, ego-tripping, love.

Introduction

Giovanni poems reflects on the different stages in her life. She is being a young adult, then grown up and later entering old age. She enjoys the four seasons, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter of which she comments in her poem. Giovanni is one of the most popular poets of her times. She grew up having a love of life and for people, with loving parents and grandparents and a happy family to support her. She has received numerous awards including the Langston Hughes award where Giovanni is hailed as "a poet of the people" by the director of the award festival.

Giovanni's father, Jones Giovanni often called 'Gus' and her mother, Yolande lived a happy life with their two daughters, Gary and Nikki. Nikki was named Yolande Cornelia Giovanni, Jr. Gary nicknamed her sister "Nikki Rosa" which again was shortened to "Nikki." Few people as she grew up and that became her popular name "Nikki." She loved her school and started writing early in her life. Students at her school were encouraged to write stories and poetry which was a joy for young Nikki. She became friends with her teacher, Sister Althea who encouraged her immensely and later on becomes a lifelong friend.

Giovanni's famous poem, "Nikki Rosa" describes how happy her childhood was in spite of their poverty. She strongly believes in the togetherness of families and the importance of the sharing of wealth and prosperity. Nikki imbibes her revolutionary ideals from her activist grandmother, Louvenia Watson, who encouraged her to take part in activities which demands privileges for African Americans. She also learnt from her grandmother the importance of fighting for her rights, of speaking the truth at all times and the importance of recognizing and respecting other people.

Giovanni completed her graduation with honors in 1964, from Fisk University, acquiring a degree in History. She immersed herself whole heartedly in writing poetry. She also involved in political activities like the Black Arts Movement and took the initiative in organizing the first Black Arts Festival. She wanted to let the youth know and be proud of their African American roots. She always stressed on the strength of African American pride, dignity and love and she always made it a point to convey these truths to the people.

Giovanni borrowed money from her family and friends and published her first book of poetry on her own, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1968). She wrote mainly for an African American people and her most important themes were about their strength and their identity. She wrote both revolutionary and personal poems in the first volume.

The style of Giovanni's poetry is different, right from the very beginning. Her poems have no punctuations or capitalizations which also expresses her deviation from the traditional way of writing poems. Her defiance and her own way of thinking are reflected in her poetry, right from the first volume. She published *Black Judgement* (1969) which delegates African American dignity and celebrates some special people.

Giovanni also revels in her responsibility as a mother. Josephson writes about a historic event in her personal life:

Thomas had made his mother proud when he attended the Million Man March held in October 1995. Thousands of African American men and boys met in the nation's capital for a day of speeches about respecting women, taking care of families, and rejecting violence. Nikki Giovanni considers that march 'one of the outstanding events of our century, one that changed how black men looked at themselves' (96).

Giovanni wrote poems for special occasions also. One such poem, "But Since You Finally Asked (A Poem Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the Slave Memorial at Mount Vernon)", deserves special mention because here the poet reinstates her belief and pride in her people, the African Americans. She glorifies in the courage, strength, pride and dignity of her ancestors. She applauds the determination and the endurance of her forefathers and renews the faith of her people in God. She writes in a style of her own, placing three dots in between lines as is seen in the following lines:

we've given...Our song to God, Our strength to the Earth...Our unflinching
belief in forgiveness...I know what I like about us...is that we let no one turn
us around...not then...not now...we plant our feet...on higher ground...I like
who we were...and who we are...and since someone has asked...let me say: 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 we are all equal in His sight...We didn't write a
constitution...we live one...We didn't say "We are the People" ...we are one.
(15-16)

These lines clearly indicate her pride and immense faith in the African American community. She feels that her people have achieved equality and freedom in their country because of their determination and quiet strength. Her people are a group of self-actualizers,

who progress purposefully ahead to achieve their self-imposed goal of attaining dignity and freedom which is their individual right. They are self-actualizers as they believe in their own strength as individuals and as a community at large and continue to prove themselves worthy of it. Giovanni revels in her joy of being an African American, being part of a community that, over the years, lives according to its strength and determination.

The growth of the self-actualization of the poet Giovanni can be analyzed through her poems. Her poems are known for their simple language and lofty ideas, taken from ordinary, everyday experiences. She writes mostly from own experiences but she manages to reach out to all her readers, to people regardless of race and gender. A true American to the core, she upholds her African American heritage and strives to revel in its uniqueness. She insists her African American folk to take pride in their unique traits and asks them to celebrate their qualities. She emerges as a spokesperson of her people and a champion of truth. She is a popular, well-loved poet whose distinctive voice is known everywhere.

Giovanni's first volume, brings out the revolutionary in her. She triumphs in the uniqueness of her people and champions their cause. She insists that 'Blackness' ought to be celebrated instead of being criticized. She insists that African American women should talk of their rights and not submit to the power of their men. She is seen to be conscious of women rights too. She believes in herself and in her ability to write poems, the evidence of which is the success of the first volume. BJ is published with the help of the sales of the first book. These poems search for a female identity as well as an African American one. She is on her journey of being a successful African American poet of the times, of being a self-actualized woman poet in her own right. The poems in the first three volumes of her poetry cater to her social needs which are political and revolutionary as she caters to the needs of her people at the time. She associates with the African American people in their fight for their rights and she vouches for their women too in their struggle against white oppression and male domination. She urges the women to fight against the doubly colonized situation they are in. She is political in her convictions and she revolutionizes her life and the life of those connected to her. She speaks boldly on what she considers right. She is hailed as a truthful person.

Giovanni insists that prevailing poverty does not diminish the love and togetherness of the African American people. The warmth of community and the joy of relationships within the family and the community at large make their society rich in their uniqueness, despite the hardships and cruelty of the outside world. Instead of harboring hate, it is this love that is their wealth and the poet urges her people to use it. The words, "Black love is Black wealth" in this poem, is one of the most quoted lines of the poet. Right from the start of her career and as a woman poet, Giovanni believed in the strength of this wealth and relies on it profusely. She upholds the notion that it is this wealth of love that showers the necessary courage and determination that her people need to move forward in life. She is fierce in her love and pride of her community of African Americans.

Giovanni fights for her people and for the cause of the women folk. She finds it unbearable to comprehend the position of black women who have to succumb to the men in their race. The woman speaker in the poem, "Woman Poem" converses about her life: "i wish

i knew how it would feel / to be free” (10, 11). To be free is what she longs for, but she is tied down by her numerous duties. The poet insists that African American men know only how to evaluate the duties of their women folk rather than recognizing them as whole individuals, capable of loving and caring for others. The poet is outraged by this attitude of the men folk. Happiness is unattainable for the women folk at this stage of life and the poet is determined to find it for them. She refuses to be controlled by the men of her race. Ultimately, Giovanni’s refusal to be controlled by African American men and the leaders of the revolution bring to light her pride in herself and in her identity as a ‘Black’, female poet. She insists in living her life as she chooses and firmly denies going according to the rules laid down by the revolutionaries. In “My Poem”, Giovanni declares her identity as a woman poet. She states:

i am 25 years old
black female poet
wrote a poem asking
nigger can you kill
if they kill me
it won’t stop
the revolution. (1-7)

This poem asserts her female identity and her freedom of choice. She says that the revolution will go on with or without her participation. But she has other works to do. She chooses to work for the rights of women. So, she pursues her career and writes about what she wants. She fiercely attacks the African American men who have subordinated their women folk. She prefers the term ‘Black’ to refer to her people. She hates the subordination of her people and lashes out against it. She writes in Gemini: “They have made Black women the new Jew while they remain the same old niggers” (111). The poet insists that she will never submit to such atrocities nor will she allow other women to be so too. She affirms that she will not be ‘the new Jew’, thus firmly asserting her women rights, adhering to speak the absolute truth always. This also stands with her bold decision later on in her life, of being a single mother to her son, Tommy and not naming the father.

In the foreword to the volume, ‘My House’, the critic, Ida Lewis, writes of Giovanni’s poems and themes: “A most interesting aspect of her work is the poet’s belief in individualism at a time when the trend in the Black community is away from the individual and toward the mass. She has been reproached for her individualistic attitudes by her critics, who have attempted to use this attribute to stamp her as irrelevant. But Nikki Giovanni’s greatness is not derived from following leaders, nor has she ever accepted the burden of carrying the revolution. Her struggle is a personal search for individual values in the Black community (xiii). Giovanni believes and applauds herself in being an African American woman and a poet.

In ‘My House,’ Giovanni clearly indicates that this is her life, her house and that she would do whatever she chooses to do with it, according to her own rules. She is bold in her convictions and her worth as an individual woman, African American poet and single mother is constantly on the rise and she is loved all the more because of it. The title poem, “My

House,” is Giovanni’s declaration of her rights as the owner of her own house and life. Here she depicts the picture of an ordinary, domestic woman busy with her household chores. But the difference comes in when the poet speaker declares that the house is her own and whatever she does there or talks about will be according to her own wish. This is clear in the lines:

i mean it’s my house
and i want to fry pork chops
and bake sweet potatoes
and call them yams
cause i run the kitchen
and i can stand the heat. (12-17)

Thus Giovanni, expresses her right to do everything according to her own desire. The idea of the rooms inside and the rooms outside into which the volume, *My House* is divided is used as a metaphor in this title poem:

and my windows might be dirty
but it’s my house
and if i can’t see out sometimes
they can’t see in either. (26-29)

This means that if the outside world views the poet in a different manner, that is, if they do not understand the poet and her convictions, neither can she understand the diverse ways of the outside world. The emphasis lies in the conviction that the poet’s life is her own; therefore, she need not bother about any criticism. This is a supreme call to her fellow female African Americans to ignore the white world and the men who oppress them and live a life of their own. She takes charge of her own self and her actions defy conventions and submit only to her own will. As Virginia Fowler correctly puts it:

On one level a love poem, “*My House*” is also a personal and artistic declaration or credo, which brings together many of the important themes and images we have seen throughout the volume, the difficulty of communication, the importance of old people, the idea that human connection and human love constitute the “real revolution”, the poet’s insistence on her right to see things from her own perspective, and, perhaps most important, her right to name and to define her world through her language (NG 77).

Giovanni search for her identity in a community of African American women is pursued relentlessly in *WM*. She uses the medium of poetry to give voice to her innermost feelings. She strives to secure a foothold in the poetic world by truthfully admitting her desire to be individualistic and to be her own self. She gives the message of complete freedom from bondage to enjoy the precious life that she has. She brings in the metaphor of a spider spinning a web from its own body as parallel to a poet spinning a poem around the reader. This is seen in the poem, “Africa”:

i am a teller of tales
a dream of dreams
shall I spin a poem around you. (1-3)

She goes on to invoke in her readers the freedom attained when every individual accepts her own inner potential. She says:

we must believe in each other's dreams
i'm told and I dream
of me accepting you and you accepting yourself
and i dream of black men and women walking
together side by side into a new world
described by love and bounded by difference
for nothing is the same except oppression and shame
may i spin a poem around you
come let's step into my web
and dream of freedom together. (34-36, 41-47)

Giovanni believes that when every woman decides to accept her own self and tries to create her own individuality, the long-awaited personal freedom will be attained. She also communicates to her readers to make full use of one's capabilities. She finds happiness in doing the ordinary things of life. She is proud to be a natural woman doing things that all women do. In this ordinariness, she finds her strength. She writes in "Revolutionary Dreams":

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. (12-16)

She believes that being a revolutionary means being natural, being able to make full use of one's own potential. Her shift from being a mere revolutionary to a personal poet is clearly highlighted and her natural qualities as a woman aids her in her life. The quintessence of femininity is quite obvious in her famous poem, "Ego Tripping" where a woman is identified as the creator of the world. Right from the beginning of the poem, the female speaker refers to her omnipotence. She identifies herself as a woman who is beautiful and compares herself to "a gazelle so swift / so swift you can't catch me" (21-22). She attributes to herself all the magnificence of the universe and declares towards the end of the poem:

i am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal
i cannot be comprehended
except by my permission
i mean . . . i . . . can fly
like a bird in the sky. (47-51)

Giovanni becomes the strong advocate of all oppressed people and she urges them to give up their bondage and lead independent lives of their own. She also asks the oppressors to ponder over what they are doing and requests them to free the oppressed. Rosa Parks violated the law for she felt it was her duty to act against the existing unjust law. She had the courage to act according to her conscience, even though she was abused and cruelly attacked. Her determination and courage paved one step ahead towards the freedom of her people, the

African Americans. Through the example of Rosa Parks, Giovanni stresses the fact that the determination of one person is sometimes just enough to change existing social conditions.

Conclusion

Giovanni's early poetry comprises of her activities as a political activist. She feels outraged at the tribulations her people have to face. She fights at the white atrocity against her people. She urges her people to fight for their rights. She insists that the African Americans should take pride in their unique traits as individuals who are courageous and as a people who are united in love and companionship. She upholds the persistence and perseverance of her people and insists that they work hard to remove all racial prejudice and inequality.

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