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Urge for Revolution in the Poems of Nikki Giovanni

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Writer, activist Nikki Giovanni has acquired considerable stature as a poet. In fact, after four decades, critics have declared that Giovanni is one of the most accomplished poets in the country. Her poetry exploded onto the literary scene during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, and most of her writings during that time encouraged socio-political change within the African American community. This paper shades line on the urge for revolution in her poems. She is known as revolutionary poet who wrote to encourage African men, women, and children to armed revolution because, in her eyes, their history and current condition made struggle necessary.

African American literature is the literature produced by African people living in America. Experience of Blacks with regards to racial prejudice and oppression, in the United States, gave birth to African American literature. Literature was a medium through which the black man could state his case to the world and exhibit the reality of their life. Writing became a function of changing the world. By the time of the sixties and early seventies a revolution of great change had occurred. 1960s was a dynamic time period in American history that continues to have a profound impact on contemporary American politics, economy, and art. Black writers utilized this precious time to showcase black pride and nationalism and highlight the black experience in their oeuvre. The most important and militant voice of this period was Nikki Giovanni.

Nikki Giovanni grew up in strongly African American area in the suburbs of Cincinnati, USA at a time when it was legal to discriminate against African American people. From the early age she had a rage for dominating society that was uncontrollable and it was deeply rooted into her soul. Nikki expounded her emotions in her poetry.

Nikki never did leave the revolution but rather carried it with her. It was deeply embedded within the walls of her mind and felt strongly within her heart. She believed that if a black person thought for himself without white inferences, then he could take his stand. She had little patience with slow change, and exhorted black Americans to rise up and take arms, as she wrote in "A litany for Pepe". Her poem is a call to black Americans to destroy the whites who oppress them as well as the Black whose passivity and compliance contribute to their own oppression.

The black revolutionary poet, Nikki Giovanni, was dedicated to liberating black people in America. Her ultimate aim was to use his art to bring about an end to white supremacy, colonialism, and oppression which affects black people. This revolutionary black poet was a political, moral, social, and spiritual leader to black Americans. The poetry that came from her pen was the major tool by which she could teach her people to reject and destroy anything that oppressed them as a separate race.

Her militant voice can be seen in her most revolutionary poem “The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black Vs Negro”.

Nigger
 Can you kill
 Can you kill
 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(Giovanni 19-20)

This poem challenges black people to reject their middle-class gratification and adopt an angry revolutionary spirit in the quest for liberation of the black community. She suggests her people that the revolutionary approach is the only one that will assure a meaningful future for black youth, who will be the beneficiaries of their efforts to liberate the black community from domination and possibly obliteration.

In her poem “For Saundra” Form *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni*, she clearly explains that this is the time of revolution.

i wanted to write
 a poem
 that rhymes
 but revolution doesn't lend
 itself to be bopping

 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. (3-5, 22-30) (Giovanni 80)

“Maybe I shouldn't write at all, but clean my gun and check my kerosene supply” , here through these line she clearly insists that this not the time to sit but time to revolt against the injustice and oppression that black people have been facing for a long time.

Nikki Giovanni was impatient and unhappy with the slow progress of whites in Black society. Her poetry is a demand for action. In her poem “Of Liberation” she guide Black people how to remove whites out of their life. She writes:

Everything comes in steps
 Negative step one: get the white out of your hair

Negative step two: get the white out of your mind
 Negative step three: get the white out of your parties
 Negative step four: get the white out of your meetings. (38-42)

(Giovanni, *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni* 42)

She becomes so rebellious that even she is ready to accept the death of black people in this rebellion though she considers it unfortunate and expresses her grief but now liberation first.

The best line of this poem from my point of view is “WILD ANIMALS CAN BE TRAINED /BUT NEVER TAMED” (66-67). She is so powerful in words that she directly touches the heart of people. This is an excellent poem which shows her revolutionary spirit. Critic R. Roderick Palmer classifies Nikki Giovanni as a “very pronounced revolutionary black writer” (Barksdale and Kinnamon 809).

The same feeling of violent revolution can be seen in her poem “Reflections on April 4, 1968” from *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni, 1968-1998*. The speaker is a female person and says that being a black woman if I cannot destroy American but at least I can protect them who want to kill motivate people through my verse to destroy it. Ultimately she wants freedom and equality at any cost.

Nikki Giovanni writes as follows in her early effort poem for Black Boys:

Where are your heroes, my little Black ones
 You are the Indian you so disdainfully shoot
 Not the big bad sheriff on his faggoty white
 Horse
 You should play run –away –slave
 Or Mau Mau
 These are more in line with your history
 Ask to your mother for a Rap Brown gun
 Santa just may comply if you wish hard enough
 Ask for CULLURD instead of Monopoly
 DO NOT SIT IN DO NOT FOLLOW KING
 GO DIRECTLY TO STREETS
 This is a game you can win. (1-12) (Gates and McKay 1799)

The message, in the poems mentioned above, is clear that we have tired of this discrimination now we want a change and change is in the form of revolution, a situation has come for do or die.

It is the very African American experience which makes her as an ardent poet who deals with the problems of the African Americans in the white dominated American society. As a black revolutionary poet, she does not seek approval or acceptance of her ideas by white America. She speaks to the brothers and sisters of her race. Through her poems she demands that black people should affirm all things black and all things white. She communicates that time has come for black people to flaunt their African heritage and become Black instead of Negroes.

Her poem “Poem for Black Boys” communicates that stop following white society and invents your own game. She stimulating young black boys to be strong and confident and live

happily despite what society thinks of them. Her poetry is not only literature of protest but primarily consciences of Black people. Her poetry is an approach to shape and change the lives of black people.

Her creative oeuvre reflects that how she constantly struggled for the dignity and equal rights of African Americans. Her poetry is created out of her desire to revolutionize the system of which her people are a part. Her poems are the poems of a black militant: angry, bitter, violent protest against racial injustice.

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