

African American/Black Identity And Gendered Resistance In The Selected Poems Of June Jordan

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Abstract

Identity has remained a recurrent and powerful theme in African American literature which writers, poets or artists of African descent cannot afford to ignore. One can observe an ongoing quest and assertion of Black identity right from the time of slave narratives until now. African Americans have a long history of being the marginalized and oppressed community in the White racist European world. Black American women in particular, have been the ‘doubly othered’ section of the American society marginalized due to their colour and gender. Even after the abolition of slavery and women’s rights movement, oppression of Black American women still persists in one form or the other. June Jordan, like other African American women writers has explored this significant issue that strongly challenges the white supremacist and sexist ideologies of the western world. Despite being one of the most published writers of the contemporary African American literature, Jordan’s writings have not been thoroughly researched and she is excluded from popular European anthologies. Although, significant studies have been done on the issue of Black Identity and Black female resistance, Jordan’s contribution in this area has not been fully explored yet. Using the theoretical framework of Black feminism, this paper will showcase how Jordan approaches the problematics of African American/Black identity and gendered resistance in her poetry. It also endeavours to propose how Jordan’s writings pave the way for new emerging identities, the hallmarks of which are freedom, multiculturalism and pluralism. The writer’s views on sexual pluralism, and the mutual relationship of sexuality and identity are also analyzed.

Keywords: Oppression, African American/ Black identity, Gendered or Black female resistance, emerging identities, sexuality, multiculturalism, sexual pluralism

Introduction

June Millicent Jordan (1936-2002) was a distinguished Black American poet, essayist, teacher, columnist and activist who expressed her powerful artistic imagination in multiple genres of literature. She believed in the power of the ‘word,’ based on biblical concepts. In the foreword of her famous book, *Civil Wars* (1981), Jordan states that “Early on, the scriptural concept that ‘in the beginning was the word and the word was with the God and the word was the God’- the idea that the word could represent and then deliver into reality what the word symbolized” (xii). Although Jordan

mastered many genres of literature, she was primarily a poet. Adrienne Rich states in her foreword to *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*, published posthumously in 2005, that “... poetry stood at the core of her sensibility” (xxii). Jordan herself confessed in her essay “Thinking about My Poetry” that “Poetry was the inside dictator” to which she herself “submitted” (*Civil Wars* 123). Despite the fact that Jordan is considered as one of the most published writers in the contemporary African American literature, she still remains a censored literary figure in the western world. Jacqueline Vaught Brogan smells politics in it while

observing the absence of Jordan in well-known anthologies. She states in her critical essay, "From Warrior to Womanist: The Development of June Jordan's Poetry" that her work does not find mention in anthologies like "Gilbert and Gubar's Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, Harris and Agüero's *An Ear to the Ground*, an anthology of contemporary ethnic poetics in America. Nor does Jordan's work appear in the first Heath Anthology of American Literature" (198).

One of the reasons for this censorship could be her lifelong commitment to combatting inequality and injustice through her writings and political activism. Jordan's philosophy of life was based on truth, freedom and justice as she reiterates the power of truth in the foreword of *Civil Wars*: "by declaring the truth you create the truth" (xii). She was a socio-politically conscious writer who always became the voice of the voiceless marginalized sections of her society. Jewelle Gomez underlines the socio-centric approach of the writer, saying that "she opened herself to our society's social needs and to the yearnings of the heart, then transformed them, most usefully, into cries of justice and celebration of human spirit" (715). She finds a "flame of justice burning deep inside Jordan that shined though in her essays, poems and activism" (717). Angela Davis in her article, "Tribute to June Jordan" throws light on the use of her poetry devoted to a useful politics, out of which justice, equality and true democracy can be prevailed and sustained. She considers her a magnificent poet and a powerful activist, who "changed people's worlds with her words and created beauty in the process" (2).

The misrepresentation of the Black identity by the dominant white male world has often been exposed in African American literature. Prominent African American writers like W.E.B Du Bois, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelo and Audre Lorde, have not only exposed this prejudiced misrepresentation but have also strongly resisted it, focusing on the self-reliance and empowerment of the Black

identity. The primary subject for the African American women writers in particular, has been the resistance against the inimical stereotyping of their gender, race and ethnicity. Using Black feminism as the theoretical framework, this research paper intends to explore how Jordan discusses this significant issue in her writings. It sheds light on the theme of gendered or Black female resistance and the emerging identities evident in her selected poems. The poems chosen for analysis are taken from Jordan's collected poems, *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*, published posthumously in 2005. Furthermore, a few essays of Jordan are also utilized to support her claims and arguments in the selected poems. These essays feature in her three books- *Civil Wars* (1981), *Technical Difficulties* (1992) and *Affirmative Acts* (1998).

Resistance to the Misrepresentation of African American/ Black Identity

African American writers have vehemently exposed and criticized the misrepresentation of Black identity by the racist European world. Jordan also unmasks and resists this racist depiction of her community. *Who Look at Me* (1969), her first book explores multiple ways through which the Black Americans are falsely misrepresented by the racist White artists. The book contains vignettes of African American life expressing the anger and anxiety of the poetic persona, complemented by twenty-seven paintings illustrating the poetic text to achieve its full meaning. The poet's persona interrupts at several places in between the text with an evocative Black English refrain, "Who look at me" which also provides the book's title. It questions and contradicts the discriminatory practices of the racism inherent in the American society. In the beginning of the text, Jordan sketches the miserable past of slavery:

we reveal
a complicated past
of tinderbox and ruin
where we carried water

for the crops
 we come from elsewhere
 victim to a rapid cruel cargo
 crime
 to separate and rip apart
 the trusting members of one
 heart. (Directed by Desire 12)

The haunted past of slavery has not only ruined the lives of Black community through colonial cargo crime but also demolished their family structure. Jordan then questions the false and prejudiced outlook of the White racists who often ignore their Black brothers and let them disappear into nothingness. She repeatedly senses a “white stair” that blinds the existence and identity of Black populace in their day to day lives:

A white stare splits the air
 by blindness on the subway
 in department stores
 The Elevator
 (that unswerving ride
 where man ignores the brother
 by his side). (Directed by Desire
 7)

Peter B. Erickson in his biographical review article, “June Jordan” analyses the poem as sketching “the damaging effect of white perceptions of black people,” where “the eye contact is the central image of interaction between two races” (150). He observes that “The white look is simultaneously a violation and a refusal of contact--it is an intrusion that negates the existence of the black person” (150). But Jordan does not conform and yield to such misrepresentations. She vehemently resists such biased thinking and accentuates the fact that the Black Americans must not submit to and mimic the Whites and their beauty standards. Instead, they ought to feel proud of their own community and identity in order to be empowered and dignified individuals with agency: “I am black

alive and looking back at you” (Directed by Desire 10). Erickson states that in the end, “the poem records a progression from victimization to resistance, from pain to anger, as it gathers the energy ultimately to refuse degradation” (151). In another poem, “And Who Are You?” Jordan refutes the White supremacist ideology that the entire world is of Whites, and they are its masters, reducing the Blacks to nothingness and a mere big black phallus, “...why should I make/ believe this place entirely/ is white/ and I am nothing/ pasted to a fantasy/ (big black phallus/wide white teeth) ...” (Directed by Desire 33).

This racist mindset, according to the poet, is firmly rooted in the psyche of a large segment of the biased White American populace whose minds have been poisoned with hatred for the Blacks since childhood. This mindset hinders them from having an equanimity of vision which should be opposed and reprimanded by the African American writers. Jordan further resists Black victimhood in poems like “I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies.” It advocates the Black community’s robust resistance and calculated vengeance against racial and gender oppression:

I will no longer lightly walk
 behind
 a one of you who fear me:

Be

afraid.

I plan to give you reasons for
 your jumpy fits
 and facial tics

I will not walk politely on the
 pavements anymore. (Directed
 by Desire 230)

Jordan uses powerful factual language to scare her White racist opponent. She ends the poem with forceful, vengeful words that reflect her fervent desire to fight oppression in all forms. The first person ‘I’ represents her gender, race, and the Black community as a whole, which she wants to be more proactive and defiant:

And if I

if I ever let you slide
 who should be extirpated from
 my universe
 who should be cauterized from
 earth
 completely

 I must become
 I must become a menace to my
 enemies. (Directed by Desire
 232)

Gendered or Black Female Resistance

Black women have been portrayed through stereotypical images – mummies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, hot mommas, jezebels and women with deviant sexuality. The logic behind such representation is to justify their oppression as Patricia Hill Collins points out in *Black Feminist Thought* that no system of oppression can work without “powerful ideological justification” (69). Such misrepresentation is a distortion of reality as Hazel Carby rightly observes in her book, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of African American Women Novelists*, calling attention to the fact that the objective is “not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, or objective social relations” (22). In the essay “I am Seeking an Attitude,” Jordan reflects on the Black woman identity. She finds that Black woman possesses an identity which is essentially two-fold – racial identity and gender identity – both being integral and inseparable: “And yet my gender identity is as basic as incontrovertible, as my racial identity. I have written the sentence “I am Black” innumerable times. I have thought that sentence, and I have felt it’s meaning all the way to the bone of my self” (*Affirmative Acts* 34). In one of her most famous and eulogized works, “Poem About My Rights,” she paints a vivid picture of subjugation and stereotypical representation of Black women. In

the following lines, she outlines the tragic history of her othered and occupied gendered community, plagued by physical and psychological assaults on their identities: “I am the history of rape/ I am the history of the rejection of who I am/ I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of myself (Directed by Desire 311). Jordan further laments on the occupied identity of Black women, who lack ownership and freedom even on their bodies, minds and souls, “I can’t do what I want/ to do with my own body” (Directed by Desire 310). In fact, their pathetic history testifies the inhuman and unfair gender oppression committed upon them. She reiterates this excruciating historical reality in the lines: “I am the history of battery assaults and limitless/ armies against whatever I want to do with my mind/ and my body and my soul” (Directed by Desire 311). They cannot embrace and express their own identity and identifying qualities, because of being bound by the chains of patriarchy and racial and gender injustice. All these kinds of oppression are justified by assigning the label ‘wrong’ to the different facets of African American identity:

I have been raped
 because I have been wrong the
 wrong sex the wrong age
 the wrong skin the wrong nose
 the wrong hair
 the wrong need the wrong dream
 the wrong geographic
 the wrong sartorial--- (Directed
 by Desire 311)

All aspects of the Black women identity, whether it is gender, race, colour or culture are being marked as “Other” and “problem”, which “everyone seeks to eliminate by forced penetration” (Directed by Desire 311). Without conforming to such selfish and distorted misrepresentation, one can find a powerful gendered resistance in this poem. Jordan disowns and ridicules these destructive labels used for Black women which are mere socio-cultural

constructs of the maimed minds of the bigoted whites. In his article, "The Love Poetry of June Jordan," Erickson points out that Jordan emphatically insists on "self-determination," in this poem, by "fending and sloughing off false terms: "I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name" (221). The emphatic ending of the poem recreates and reasserts the identity of her community: "My name is my own my own my own" (Directed by Desire 311). It showcases Jordan's strenuous efforts towards self-definition as Audre Lorde rightly remarks, "If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others- for their use and our detriment" (Sister Outsider 45).

A similar technique of unraveling the pathetic history of Black women like that observed in "Poem About My Rights" is evident in Jordan's poems like "Kissing God Goodbye" and "My Victim Poem." She finds the history of Black women as the history of absentia and denial, wherein even their names became the "names of the iniquitous/ the names of the accursed/ the names of the tribes of the abomination" (Directed by Desire 572). She confesses that their names had not been the names of prophets or seers:

my name is not Abraham
my name is not
Moses/Leviticus/Solomon/Cain
or Abel
my name is not
Matthew/Luke/Saul or Paul
my name is not Adam. (Directed
by Desire 572)

In "My Victim Poem," Jordan yet again laments the deplorable history of Black women whose ancestors were brutally killed in the atrocities of slavery. Their mothers were "treated like pitiful trash" and their fathers' voices were forcefully muzzled (Directed by Desire 608). She regretfully ponders upon the identity crisis of Black women while comparing them with "the millions of females who live without name" (Directed by Desire 608). The prejudiced racist White world ignored and treated them as its "mule" or

"somebody's fool" (Directed by Desire 608). So, it is the deadly victimhood of Black women and Black race at large that June Jordan despises: "I am the victim, I am the dead./ I am the meaning of grace without pride./ I am the meaning of race suicide./ I am the victim, I am the dead" (Directed by Desire 609). Regardless of the fact that her gendered community has been neglected and abandoned throughout history, the poet praises their powerful identities. Jordan believes that Black women are endowed with distinct characteristics that even prophets and seers lack. She asserts that Black women are beautiful, dark-skinned, loving, free-spirited, firm, resilient, family-centric, independent, sacrificing, fertile and unpredictable as delineated in the poem "Kissing God Goodbye":

my name is female
my name is freedom
my name is the one who lives
outside the tent of the father
my name is the one who is dark
my name is the one who fights for
the end of the kingdom
my name is the one at home
my name is the one who bleeds
my name is the one with the
womb
my name is female
my name is freedom
my name is the one the bible
despised
my name is the one astrology
cannot predict
my name is the one the law
cannot invalidate
my name is the one who loves.
(Directed by Desire 572).

Jordan has composed a number of other poems and essays that display Black female resistance. In the poem, "Memo to Daniel Pretty Moynihan," the poet confronts her oppressor (a White male opponent) in a reproaching tone, urging him not to interfere in her daily matters. He must instead

liberate her from sexist and racist “female black pathology” (Directed by Desire 83). Jordan’s fearless and resolute attitude in her writings resonates with the views of other Black feminists who advocate self-definition and self-reliance of their oppressed community. Maria Stewart, one of the forerunners of Black feminist thought, provokes Black women to explore new definitions for their self-reliance to resist against racial and sexist oppression: “It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for that will never elevate us. Possess the spirit of independence. . . . Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted” (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 1).

Emerging Identities through Multicultural and Pluralistic Perspective

Francis M. Deng in his book, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (1995) defines identity as “the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language and culture” (1). In *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (1996), Peter Katzenstein considers identity as “mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other” (59). Intersectionality by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2019) is a recent theoretical model that has a significant impact on the way social identity is viewed and formed. Theories of Intersectionality suggest that to gain a full understanding of an aspect of our social identity, we must examine how each identity interacts with every other social identity. There is also an emphasis to know how each manifestation of social oppression (racism, classism, sexism) interacts with every other manifestation of social oppression and the ways through which it sustains itself through these intersectional relationships.

W.E.B. Du Bois proposed a bicultural perspective for Black people in America, one that integrates the cultures of people of Africa and European

heritage. Famous political leaders of the 1960s, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, as well as contemporary African American writers such as Maya Angelou, believe in and manifest the multicultural perspective of Black identity, as evident in their autobiographies. In fact, Jordan also believed in multicultural approach to Black identity. In her essay “On Bisexuality and Cultural Pluralism”, Jordan declares that “I turn to the concept of pluralism. Is that a start, at least, toward an intellectual illumination of our complex identities and experience?” (*Affirmative Acts* 133). She rejects the connotation of the symbol of American coin, *E Pluribus Unum*, which means (from many, one) and believes instead in the “democratic philosophy of cultural pluralism: A society in which numerous distinct ethnic and racial and religious groups rightfully and equally CO-exist within one nation” (133). Jordan further confesses in the same essay that “I am cultural pluralist: from the one, many, many, many. Because many is natural. Because many is always happening- more and more, in fact” (136). She goes on to remark that “I am in favor of the absolute unqualified preservation of the complicated pluralist society that already exists whether we like it or not” (136). One can also notice Jordan’s “multiracial, multiethnic and multicultural” outlook of identity because of her own parental lineage and childhood. She discusses her complicated and complex heritage in the same essay:

My mother, Afro-Caribbean and East Indian

My Father, Euro-Caribbean and Chinese

My Childhood: East Coast-Urban-Negro community and universe

My Education: virtually all Black Public school followed by virtually all- white Prep school

and Ivy League College.
(Affirmative Acts 135)

Sexual Pluralism

Sexuality is an essential part of one's identity. Lorde expressed the importance of one's sexuality in the interview by Charles H. Rowell: "My sexuality is part and parcel of who I am, and my poetry comes from the intersection of me and my worlds... (61). Jordan was a bisexual writer and she advocated complete sexual freedom and sexual pluralism in her writings. Apart from being a cultural pluralist, she proclaims herself as a sexual pluralist also: "I am a cultural pluralist. And as sexuality is a biological, psychological and interpersonal factor of cultural experience, I am a sexual pluralist" (Affirmative Acts 137). Like cultural pluralism, she rejects the dominant E Pluribus Unum approach to sexuality:

Sexuality, like culture writ large, has been subjected to the E Pluribus Unum approach to diversity for a long time. Regardless of the physical and emotional varieties of sexual interest/desire/need represented by the varieties of human beings that we, all of us, make manifest, the E Pluribus Unum club of Dominant Culture-members only- would have us accept that sexuality is something clear/something simple/basic/God-given, or, in short, heterosexual. (Affirmative Acts 137)

The freedom for all sexual preferences and tastes are apparent in Jordan's writings. She celebrates the revolutionary power of love and does not confine it to only dominant heterosexual thing. In the poem titled, "From the Talking Back of Miss Valentine Jones, No.2", Jordan expresses her bisexual desires, "I am not a lesbian but/ I would like to have a real/ experience with a girl"

(Directed by Desire 238). Rich notes in the foreword to Haruko/ Love Poems: "She explores many kinds of love, towards herself and others, male and female..." (xi). Rich observes that in Jordan's poetry "the motive is driven by desire and desire is personal, concrete, particular and sensual. The connections between desire and solidarity become palpable in many of these poems" (x). There are poems like "The Rationale, or "She Drove Me Crazy"" in which Jordan romanticizes the sexual encounter with a girl.

In the essay, "A New Politics of Sexuality," Jordan denounces the stereotypical politics of sexuality, which means male subjugation of female, privileging heterosexuals to homosexuals and homosexual's contempt of bisexuals. She considers it a clear dictation where "what we should do, what we should desire, what we should dream about, and how we should behave ourselves, generally" is determined by others (Technical Difficulties 188). She believes it an extreme case of tyranny which "dictates to the human heart" (Technical Difficulties 188). According to her, sexual preference is part of the whole person, and that freedom means the freedom to be a whole person, as "freedom is indivisible or it is nothing at all..." (Technical Difficulties 190). Lorde also observes that all kinds of oppression – racism, sexism, heterosexism and homophobia, unanimously termed as "forms of human blindness" emanate from "the same root – an inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self, when there are shared goals" (Sister Outsider 45). In *Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan*, Margaret Grebowicz considers Jordan's position on sex and sexuality as "political" which works "towards liberation" (162). Resisting against all kinds of gender, sexist, racial and political oppression, Jordan voices her opinion in tandem with the views of her contemporary Black feminists: "I can voice my ideas without hesitation or fear because I am speaking, finally,

about myself. I am Black and I am female and I am a mother and I am bisexual and I am a nationalist and I am an antinationalist. And I mean to be fully and really all that I am!" (Technical Difficulties 189).

Conclusion

The theme of resistance against the misrepresentation of African American/ Black identity and her gendered community by the racist White Eurocentric realm and the sexist world are quite palpable in Jordan's writings. In poems like *Who Look at Me*, she has vividly depicted the dreadful past of Black slavery. She laments and problematizes the detrimental effects of racism on the Black identity generated by the dominant White gaze. Gendered resistance or Black female resistance can be clearly observed in Jordan's poetry and political essays. She criticizes White racist and sexist artists for portraying Black women in a biased and stereotypical manner, assigning them the self-constructed label of 'wrong' in the varied aspects of identity. Following the art of Black feminists, Jordan redefines the lost Black woman identity in several of her poems like "Poem about My Rights" and "Kissing God Goodbye." She also paves way for the formation of the new emerging identities, empowering and enabling the African American subjects free to express themselves. They celebrate their multi-cultural, multi-ethnic background and pluralistic nature, and are free to discuss openly their sexuality without any fear of social stigma or shame. Like Lorde and other Black feminists, Jordan finds a strong connection between one's identity and sexuality. She confesses about herself being a cultural pluralist who advocates for multiculturalism, and is an ardent supporter of sexual pluralism. Jordan's writings suggest that a free individual has complete and indivisible freedom on his/her entire body and can enjoy sexual freedom without the interference or imposition of social stigmas like homophobia. She denounces the orthodox and stereotypical politics of sexuality and compares it with racial or cultural oppression that suppresses

natural emotions and desires, creating another obstruction to one's freedom.

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