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Verse & Colors: Nikki Giovanni's Poems for Children

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Abstract

Nikki Giovanni, America's well-loved poet, popularly known as the Princess of Black Poetry, is an intergenerational poet. Her poems include readers from all generations including the youth and the older generation. But her poems for little children are of a different kind. These books are printed with bright colors and large illustrations, which are loved by her little readers.

Giovanni's poems for children include topics about African American history and culture and she celebrates her people through it. She inculcates the love shared by her people and exults in the power of the community. She portrays happy families and simple joys of the childhood, images which little children can identify with. She believes that black love is black wealth and upholds the ideals in her poems. She uses repetition and rhythm in her poetry and the bright illustrations reinforce the idea.

Through her children's poetry, Giovanni states her belief that art is essential for life and it should be sustained. She conveys this message to her young readers through specific poems for them. This paper delineates these ideas of the poet by going through her poems, specifically for children.

Keywords: Art, Culture, Childhood, Children, Colors

Nikki Giovanni is one of the most popular and well-loved African American poets of her times, with more than fifteen volumes of poetry and ten books, specifically for children, to her credit. 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 and is hailed as "a poet of the people". Giovanni's poetry for children is written in simple and truthful words, with great vision. She writes in a simple language and in a style which is easy for children to read and understand.

Her 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" by a few people as she grew up and that became her popular name. She loved her school and started writing early in her life. Judith Pinkerton Josephson, a biographer, comments in her book, Nikki Giovanni: Poet of the People:

The Giovanni family was poor, but Gus and Yolande stressed the importance of respect, love, education and independence. From the gospel hymns her family sang at church, Giovanni gained a strong sense of history and her own roots as an African American. (21)

Her love for the African American community and their culture was embedded deep in her life from her family, a family that believed in togetherness and sharing, strong values that kept them going, despite being poor. They valued what they shared as a family and a community, more than having wealth and power which they did not have.

Her 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 sharing. She 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. She focuses on the love and happiness of growing up in the joy of a family, a typical African American home, in spite of the poverty and unhappy instances of segregation and personal issues faced by them. She believes that others cannot comprehend her or her people, of their happiness in spite of their poverty and struggles. It is clear through the following lines of the poem:

And though you are 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
Christmasses
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy. (20-33)

The poet 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. The poet 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.

Giovanni brings out a book of poetry for children, *Spin a Soft Black Song* (1971), which contains themes that children enjoy. She highlights her happy childhood in spite of

segregation and poverty. She writes that the white folk would never understand the happiness shared by her people despite the hardships and man-made restrictions which hinder them in their daily life. She insists that white folk misunderstood the Black folk and they would never realize the togetherness and happiness of the Black families. She is fierce in her love and pride of her community of African Americans.

Ego Tripping and Other Poems for Young People (1973), is published which encourages young children to be proud of themselves and their unique qualities. Another volume of poetry for children, Vacation Time (1979) was written as Giovanni believed that fun and frolic as well as the expressions of children ought to be nurtured and cherished.

The quintessence of femininity is seen 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)

Her assertion is that to understand her, one needs to ask her permission. Her vision of flying freely as a bird in the vast expanse of the sky, with its unlimited possibilities, makes Giovanni special to her young readers. Her initiative of being free and individualistic compels them also to think and act differently. She states that no one can understand her without her permission which is true of all women, irrespective of age, color or creed, who can create for themselves their own identity by their own inner strength. The imagery of the bird flying in the vast sky clearly expresses the freedom that women can have in the vast expanse of the world they live in. Amidst the supremacy of men and the distinction of race, when women try to live their own lives, enjoying their personal freedom and deciding their future, their freedom can find no limits. Hence through these lines, Giovanni beckons all women, especially African American girls and women, to overcome all boundaries of gender and race and live a life of freedom that pleases. She conveys this beautifully through illustrations and colorful images when she publishes these poems later on, in a book edited for children, titled Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat. (2008)

Giovanni takes her art of writing poems seriously. The simple, artistic view of her craft is seen in her poems. Giovanni always has a special word for children. She tells them to love and care for other people. She also urges them to be creative and to live life to the fullest. She comments on children's literature in the poem, "Redfish, Eels, and Heidi": "I love children's literature because it really isn't children's literature, it is folk literature. It is stories for people to carry to each other." (51-53). She believes that the true heroes are those who live their lives

victoriously and with hope for the future. Giovanni, through her creativity, urges little children to be creative and optimistic in their lives. "And isn't that what literature should teach us. To be our own hero. To love. To care. To cry. To laugh. To live. And try to let others live, too" (82-84). Giovanni believes in literature and believes that it is one's own creativity that makes a person a complete human being. People learn to care and share for other people as well and make the world a better place to live in. Giovanni hopes that children will take responsibility for their actions. She hopes that children of today will be better citizens of tomorrow, people who will grow up with love and concern for other people too.

Giovanni's poems for children take on the perspective of children and little things are noticed, things that often go unnoticed by adults. The poems talk on topics that children are fond of- napping, dancing, playing, stars, mommies and daddies, friends and fears. In these poems for little children, she does not forget the theme close to her heart- her message of African American love and pride, which she wants to instill in the little children. For instance, in the "dance poem", she writes according to the rhythm and beat of Black music:

all you children gather round
we will dance and we will whorl
we will dance to our own song
we must spin to our own world
we must spin a soft Black song
all you children gather round
we will dance together. (19-25)

She instigates her little readers to be individualistic, as she writes in the way they can understand, in the poem called "the drum":

daddy says the world is
a drum tight and hard
and i told him
i'm gonna beat
out my own rhythm. (1-5)

This little poem alongside the picture of a happy, smiling African American boy, who enjoys playing on his drum, highlights the message of individualism, of relying on one's own inner potentials. The poet teaches the younger generation the need to be daring and different in their growth process, even at a very young age. The poet also insists that through education and personal determination, girls ought to be different and unique in their individuality. Lofty ideas are inculcated in the children at a very tender age. The poet believes that the life goal of every young African American girl should be to achieve uniqueness. The poet herself, who is different, inspires her young readers to be independent and grow towards achieving their own goals in life.

The poem, "Covers", assures the child the security of a good night's sleep. The picture of a child sleeping peacefully under a cover filled with different images, gives a feeling of immense protection and love for the child:

Nighttime covers
all the things that creep
Blankets cover me
when I'm asleep.(5-8)

Reassuring the child and taking images from nature gives the child an overall sense of security and love that is needed. Thus, on the whole, this volume of poems delight the readers as they venture into the world of children and enjoy the time of vacation and of life in general, in happiness and fun, instead of the gloominess of the title poem mentioned earlier. Entering into a child's world from a child's perspective enables the poet, and along with her, her readers, to enjoy life to the fullest, despite responsibilities and struggles. The poet convinces her readers that happiness can be attained with contentment in life, relying on one's inner resources and capabilities. Knoxville, Tennessee (1994), illustrated by Larry Johnson, celebrates summer life, out in the open, in the community of people one loves. The warmth and love flowing around the people surround the little children and give them a sense of security and belonging. Bright illustrations of eating okra and cabbage, buttermilk, fresh corn and homemade ice-cream add to the loving and togetherness of the African Americans. The church community, picnic and gospel music-all highlight the rich cultural heritage brought through the African Americans. They are depicted as happy people, reveling in their relationship with each other. Genuine love and support is portrayed through the words and through the pictures in the book.

Warmth and love radiates among the African American people and the poet believes that it is this communion that keeps her people strong and determined to fight all the detractors of their freedom. She continues to believe that their love is their biggest wealth and she values it all the more. The Genie in the Jar (1996) is typical of Giovanni as she puts her words into African American songs and images and makes her own, individualistic, yet powerful music. The words are few but precise and the rhythm of the blues is evident in the lines:

make the sky sing a Black song sing a blue song
sing my song make the sky sing a Black song
from the Black loom from the Black loom. (9-11)

The warmth and togetherness of the African Americans is highlighted in the poem. Instructions are aptly provided:

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. (14-25)

When the girl is released from the warmth of her mother's arms, she is asked to be careful as she explores the world on her own, away from the loom and the support of her community. Here also, the little girl is asked to go on her own but to be careful of the outside world. One ought to explore new possibilities carefully and at the same time, being aware of the risks involved- is one theme that Giovanni wants to convey to all the younger generation and this is beautifully conveyed through the poem.

In all of her poetry for children, Giovanni uses language that children can understand and easily relate to. The fun and frolic that children enjoy are colorfully displayed and beautifully crafted with words accompanying the rhythm and beat familiar to the African Americans. The Sun Is So Quiet (1996) and The Girls in the Circle (2004) are two other volumes brought out by the poet for children. The illustration of the bright yellow sun and the dark skinned children playing on the beach, rhythmic displays of dancing and singing songs, all add to the familiar scenes of happy childhood memories. Repetitions of sound and beat add to the beauty of the poems.

African American history is made clear to the children through the story of Rosa Parks. Rosa (2005) celebrates the African American seamstress, Rosa Parks for her courageous act on a bus on December 1, 1955. The act made history. 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. She uses this incident in a few poems and she also made it a subject for the poem with the same name in a later edition where she uses the name as a verb synonymous to fighting for one's rights: 'do the rosa parks/ say no no' is repeated and the fact is reinstated that one has to fight for one's rights:

Shame the bad
Comfort the good
Do the rosa parks
Just like she would. (13-16)

Rosa Parks courageous act which eventually lead to the emancipation of the African Americans is brilliantly conveyed to children in a language which they would understand. The historic friendship between two important people in African American history is

portrayed through the poem, Lincoln & Douglass: An American Friendship (2008). Lincoln, the sixteenth American president who delivered the Emancipation Proclamation and Frederick Douglass, a slave turned American abolitionist leader form a strong a strong bond over shared ideals to work towards a common goal. Once again, the children get a glimpse of their history through the words of their beloved poet.

Giovanni's latest contribution to children's literature is her work which retells the famous Aesop fable of the ant and the grasshopper. In The Grasshopper's Song: An Aesop's Fable Revisited (2008), the poet asserts that it is worthwhile to live in a world where art and poetry is well appreciated. In a defense for the value of art, the poet puts the ants on trial for deserting the grasshopper. Angry that his singing is unappreciated by the ants who relied on his music to make their summer work easier, seeking respect and half of the bounty of summer from the ants, Nestor and Abigail Ants, Jimmy Grasshopper argues in a woodland courtroom, presided by Judge Oscar Owl. In the subversive retelling of the famous fable, the jury ends up ruling in favor of the grasshopper. The story is retold but a message is conveyed that art is to be appreciated for what it is.

Reading through Giovanni's poems for children is a delightful experience. The poet leaves a legacy of simple, well written, beautifully illustrated poems for little children. She believes that children should be aware of the history of their ancestors but at the same time, live for themselves, having their own individual decisions. Childhood memories, historical and cultural traditions and values ought to be nourished and cherished and handed down to the younger generations. The value that the poet places for art and literature is evident in her poetry. Her belief in the folk culture and the hip hop and beat poetry is highlighted through the form and structure of her poems. The children understand the beauty of beat and the rhythm of words and repetitive sounds at a very young age as they read through her verse. She instills in them a love and pride for their community and their rich traditions. The education and value of art, heritage and culture is handed down through her verse and depicted in beautiful colors, in and through her poetry. It is no wonder that Nikki Giovanni is loved and read by all her young readers.

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