POETICS OF RACE IN THE SELECTED POETRY OF AUDRE LORDE AND OODGEROO NOONUCCAL

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ABSTRACT
The poems of Lorde and Noonuccal have strong narrative patterns with incidents and sequences that interrogate questions of ultimate intelligibility. The engagement of the poems reveals movements of thought that one can grasp only at a figural level which will aid the construction of meaning in the texts. Lorde’s “Power,” “Coal” and “Sisters in Arms,” and Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s “A Song of Hope,” “No more Boomerang” and “We Are Going” are often read from the theoretical dimensions of Feminism, Ecocriticism and Postcolonialism. These studies, with the theories, have as well focused on the study of the subjection and objectification of women, the thematic preoccupations of the erotic, the deification of anthropomorphic elements of nature, and the influences of colonialism on the colonized. Poetics of race deals with how race implicates relationship between the black and white races, and the social and ideological constructions of identities that stratify humans on grounds of skin colour. In this study, the focus is therefore the investigation of poetics of race in the theoretical dimension of Critical Race Theory.

Keywords: Pigmentocracy, Colorism, Prejudice, Un-interaction, Unbelongingness, Othering, Difference and Victimization

Introduction
AudreLorde, a onetime African American New York State Poet Laureate, Bill Whitehead Award winner, and a nominee for the National Book Award for poetry, has published volumes of poetry such as Coal, The Black Unicorn, Hanging Fire etc. OodgerooNoonuccal, an Australian Mary Gilmore Medalist, Jessie Litchfield Award winner, and the Fellowship of Australian Writer’s Award, has published volumes of poetry such as …… The selected poems of these two poets have received strong criticisms from different theoretical dimensions by scholars. Rashedi, through the critical lens of Feminism, sees Lorde’s “Coal” deals with eros that is “traditionally deemed as feminine by having their speakers expose their deepest vulnerabilities and insecurities as well as having them educate their readership on the various injustices that men in positions of power impose upon Black women” (13). Also, it deals with “how to counter these hegemonic forces by voicing, writing, and literally uttering the poetic word: the repressed, unrecognized erotic knowledge” (21). Dhaiomy also argues that “Coal” is a construction of identity and a clarion call “for African Americans to recognize and celebrate their [collective] singularity as a people” (231), while “Sisters in Arms” presents racial politics in South Africa. Lorde’s “Power,” studied by Rudnitsky, is a fine use of syntactic ambiguity which “calls into question monolithic subjectivity and enacts a dialogic theory of differences” (484) between man and fellow man.

However, we take our bearings from Northrop Frye to argue that “literature,… is, so far as we know, an inexhaustible source of new critical discoveries, and would be even if new works of literature ceased to
be written. If so, then the search for a limiting principle in literature in order to discourage the development of criticism is mistaken” (17). A work is literature in so far as it is radically ambiguous, complex and multilayered interweave in itself. Criticism (judgment) does not seek to exhaust the work because to exhaust is to multiply. It thus aims as preserving (Heidegger 66) the literary work. Most criticisms on Lorde and Noonucal via the theoretical dimensions of Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism, and Feminism in reading femininity, oral tradition, and the effects of colonialism, have shown that they have by no means exhausted the texts; this is so far as literary criticism is “shaped by what one understands literature as” (“Aristotle’s Double” 35). Poetics of race which deals with how race implicates relationship between the black and white races on grounds of skin colour, and how “[s]trife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices [are] twisted into the very fibre of being” (Woolf 6) forms the “deeper patterns and meanings” (Akwanya and Chukwumzezie 30) in the selected texts.

Race is a central concern in the world and one of the key principles in diasporic studies. Many scholars and critics have preoccupied themselves with the issue of race. In Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin White Masks argues that “[t]he white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness” (3) and ‘the black man must be black in relation to the white man” (82 -83). In such a world where such duality exists as a result of “asymmetries of race” (Stoler 634) or “boundries of race” (635), mutual correspondence finds no space there because of the consciousness of the body which Fanon refers to as “a negating activity” and the body “is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (83). In this mode, blacks feel de-indemnized (Greer xxiii) and unbelonging (xi) where they are but found themselves in a different world “divested of illusions and lights [and they are] ...an alien, a stranger” (Camus 6). Claude Levi-Strauss (5) argues that “[i]t would be a waste of time to devote so much talent and effort to demonstrating that, in the present state of scientific knowledge, there is no justification for asserting that any one race is intellectually superior or inferior to another….”. Dr Rowan Woolf believes that race is fictional. He sees it as a construction that enables a group to perpetuate evil against another group. The meaning we assign to race is that one is beneficial to a group and detrimental to the other as he calls race “a socially constructed artifact” with the “amorphous” categorizations of people (1). Ashimolowo sees poetics of race as “an ideology, a belief that one race is superior to another race. It is not only a belief; it is an action, a practice and discrimination on the basis of such belief. It is behaving toward another group of people with a perceived thought that one is superior and the other is inferior” (193).

**Pigmentocracy as Un-interactional Levels of Existence**

Pigmentocracy is a system where people are stratified and ruled on grounds of “colorism”, the “outright acts of discrimination and subtle cues of disfavor” (Hunter 241). Thus, such embodies what Dikee radically calls “exclusionary politics” (Allegory 18), where we encounter one being abstracted from the integrality of existence and thrown to be “on the periphery of existence” (10) as a result of racial prejudice and “stereotypism” (7). This practice of “insider-outsider dyadic construct… [or] two dichotomous and binary systems – one White one Black” (14 -15) captures levels of un-interaction between whiteness and blackness. There is presence of disunity and this means that the two be according to their skin; and skin colour is subsumed into the system as a determinant factor definitive of how to be. Audre Lorde’s “Power” and “Sisters in Arms” capture these pigmentocratic un-interactional levels of existence, otherwise known as “whiteness as property” in Critical Race Theory.

Lorde’s “Power” is the acquittal of a white policeman for the shooting of a ten-year-old black boy. Rendered in a narrative grand style, the poem introduces the persona in the discourse in the first part which deals with a profound philosophical argument that ascertains the difference between poetry and rhetoric. In the poem, it is ones readiness to “kill” oneself instead of one’s children in relation to rhetoric and poetry is in question. The killing is not only semantically grounded as one that is about death but also the voluntary surreptitious insurrection of racial practices that ravage the society of the persona. The killing is a radical interrogation of these practices as a revolutionary ouevre that gives rise to thought; using images of death and dying in the evocation of the emotions of grief and fury. The writing of poetry is presented in the poem as the killing of one’s self, and as a preferable way of dealing with one’s egoism. The killing of the self shares resemblances with poetry in that poetry involves objectivity. The objective presence of the writer in writing the poem is what is entailed in the poem as dying.

In the second stanza of the poem, the persona is engaged in the thought where she is “trapped” in a white desert. This is thus read in the stanza:

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
There are tapes to prove that, too. (17-24) Kimberle Crenshaw has argued that race is one of the “intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works [extremely] to exclude or marginalize those who are different” (1242). In a society where certain classes of individuals are treated better than the others, the two classes exist in un-interactional levels. The third stanza of the poem presents these perspectives of politics of race this way:

A policeman who shot down a ten year old in Queens
Stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood
And a voice said “Die you little motherfucker” and
There are tapes to prove it. At his trial
This policeman said in his own defense
‘I didn’t notice the size nor nothing else
Only the color’. And
There are tapes to prove that, too. (17-24)

In the above, we see racial violence at play. The white brutality of the innocent black child is as a result of his (the boy’s) skin colour. The metaporization of the second line of the blood as that which is childish is a representation of the innocent blacks who suffer racial violence. In the next line, there is a proof for the heinous action of the policeman as we see in the voice which boldly says “Die you little motherfucker.”

This expression shows intentionality in the act of killing. And in the fourth line of the stanza, the metaphor of “tapes to prove” the act is also a symbol of injustice. The tapes are the skin colour of the black boy through which he is judged – historically, economically, physically and psychologically. In the tone of the poem we sense indifference which, of course, is as a result of these un-interactional levels of existence where the white man is buried in his whiteness and the black man in his; and the two still inhabit the same environment. Since the domineering is the white man, the black man suffers for his blackness. The white policeman is a representation of all whites and the black boy is the representation of all black including the
speaker herself. The white policeman’s indifference is affected where he says: “I didn’t notice the size nor nothing else/ Only the color.” This “unjust social order” (Freire 44) shows evidently a colour conscious society where nothing else is noticed apart from skin colour and thus, the policeman has already judged the innocent boy through his skin colour; having known that there “are tapes to prove that, too.” This is actually extreme indifference because the psychology of the policeman is already conditioned towards black skin colour hatred; and he knows quite well that he has upheld the *virtue* of the white majority.

However, the action of the thirty-seven year old man is justified or rather proven with the “tapes.” He is set free for a crime he commits “by eleven white men who said they were satisfied” with the skin colour evidence he presents in the court during his trial. The white policeman goes scot free for the act he committed because of the pigmentocratic system of government being practiced at the detriment of the black man which creates an unharmonious difference in the mind of the whites. The only evidence in the action is the skin which is the “only” noticeable trait. And having noticed the skin, the white man is aware that the boy is human and innocent but kills him because he is aware that “there are tapes to prove that.” The first five lines of the stanza read thus:

> Today that 37 year old white man  
> With 13 years old police forcing  
> Was set free  
> By eleven white men who said they were satisfied  
> Justice had been done (25-29)

The persona tells us about the mother of the deceased who says that she is “convinced” by the justification of the racial brutality and murder of the innocent black boy. The persona describes the mother as one who accepts the injustice and “lined her own womb with cement/ to make a graveyard for our children.” Here, we notice that the innocent child is collectively called “our children” and the image of the “womb” is a metaphor for black mothers.

Whiteness as property is one of the key principles of Critical Race Theory which is explored in Lorde’s “Sisters in Arms.” To be white is to *be*; and the whiteness of the skin is a property for privileges and the right to live comfortably. In the poem, Lorde presents a similar issue discussed in her “Power.” The persona is disgusted by the politics of race that has pervaded the society. Only the issues concerning the whites are being taken care of by the society. The system is one that excludes the people of colour and leaves them at the edge of their mirth. The media are concerned with what happens to the white, and that alone is what is projected to the world. The persona we are confronted with shows us several pigmentocratic shades of the society where many blacks are dead and no one knows about their demise as a result of their skin colour. It was a society for the white majority. The poem reads thus:

> I reach for the taste of today  
> the *New York Times* finally mentions your country  
> a half-page story  
> of the first white south african killed in the “unrest” (19-22)

The persona above presents her encounter with the event “of today” where she reads in the *New York Times* the killing of a white man. The use of the word “today” in permanence of racism, a key tenet of Critical Race Theory, means that racism is still subsumed into the political landscape of the society. The use of the “taste” above is a metaphor that shows that the news of the death of the white man is held *reluctantly* by the media; for the death of a black boy is human and innocent but kills him because he is aware that “there are tapes to prove that.”

With the movement of thought and the “sudden upsurge of memory,” (Akwanya, *Eros* 379) the persona moves on to contrast the special treatment given to the whites in the media by mentioning the names of blacks who have died but are not recognized in the media because of their skin colour. Most of Lorde’s poetry about race features more of children’s victims. The victimization of these children is the victimization of their childhood innocence. At some levels, we see that these children being mentioned are representative of the innocent blacks who suffer racial prejudice. In the poem below we see that the newspaper has not recorded “Black children massacred at Sebokeng” because they are blacks. The newspaper does not record the “six-year-olds imprisoned” nor “Thabo Sibeko” because they are all blacks and whose dead does not deserve national consciousness as that of the “white south African.” This is seen below in the poem:

> Not of Black children massacred at Sebokeng  
> six-year-olds imprisoned for threatening the state  
> not of Thabo Sibeko, first grader, in his own blood  
> on his grandmother’s parlor floor (23-26)

The persona’s consciousness functions here at a higher level. She is a custodian of the battered history of the blacks. She moves on to mention some other children who have died and are forgotten as a result of their
Recovery of the Self from the Other as the Search for Primordial Freedom

In Lorde’s “Coal,” we are presented with revolutionary aesthetics. The persona we encounter here is what I call a collective individual who represents all black; to Dieke and Igwedinia, the persona is a custodian of “black historical consciousness” who looks at how such “intersects with collective (public) memory” (155). The self is a collective one which “belongs to the people, and the people find voice in the self” (Butterfield 3). Coal is black and this blackness of the coal is what the persona compares himself to. He is proud of his skin colour and seeks to give a counter-story or a counter-narrative against the socially constructed blackness the people of colour are associated with. This collective self is thus “reopened to the possibility of self authentication” (Dieke Allegory 17). The persona proudly asserts himself as the original man. For Freire, the oppressed individual is one that can define oppression, as well as the need for liberation. The liberation must be achieved through action that will interrogate the society towards equality among humanity. This idea he thus renders to us:

As individuals or as peoples, by fighting for the restoration of their humanity they will be attempting the restoration of true generosity. Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors’ violence, lovelessness even when clothed in false generosity (45).

Further, he states that “[i]n order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both” (44). Such self-proclamation or quest for the authentic selfhood is captured in the poem as seen in the first stanza:

I
Is the total black, being spoken
From the earth’s inside. (1-3)

Here, that “particular language whose peculiar mode of being is ‘literary’” (Foucault The Order 326) functions at a higher level. The “I” is singled out as it stands apart as an embodiment of collective idea. The use of the verb “is” in line 2 corresponds to the idea of collective individuality. The totality of blackness takes us back to the title, coal. The persona who is the “I” as well as the coal is one “being spoken/ From the earth’s inside.” From the “earth’s inside” is the originality of the black man. The poem has here created the kind of earth that has inside where voices are heard from. The persona is not the “disembodied voice, dedicated and set aside,” (Ellison qtd in Chigbu and Nweze 92) but the kind that is a part of the whole or the one whose essence is its wholeness. The poem is an urge to love and cherish one’s black skin in the face of brutality and racial prejudice. Just like a child coming from the womb of his mother, like the diamond coming from coal and like words coming out as sound, the persona emerges from her black self, “from the earth’s inside.” She recovers herself from the idea of the socially constructed blackness and asserts her true black self as she compares herself to the shining of “a diamond on glass windows/ Singing out within the crash of passing sun” (9-10). The emotive images evoked in the poem are an indication of her struggle as a black to free herself from the constraint of the society which uses its power to identify one as black and the other as white with the prejudice attached to it; and being judged with such identities. Not minding the fact that she is marginalized, she frees herself from the marginality by way of strong resistance and insurrection, and celebrates her true self saying: “I am black because I come from the earth’s inside/ Take my word for jewel in your open light.” In fact, “Coal” is “an enactment of an evolving historical self… [which strives to] reinvent a new black self, to write the black self and the corresponding ego back into gilded significance” (Dieke Beyond vii - viii).

In Noonucal’s “A Song of Hope,” there is a level of physical and psychological captivity displayed. The persona presents this captivity as something he can overcome by functioning within the body...
of his people. The people, collectively victimized (Obiechina 151) as a result of their skin colour, now seeks to free themselves from their racially victimized captive lives.

The poem opens on a note of hope as it echoes the title of the poem. The persona urges his people to observe the emergence of a new dawn. It is the dawn of hope. The people are meant to observe the “waking” of the world and its ushering in of “a bright new day.” The poetic event unveils an aspect of the search for freedom from racial prejudice and brutality. This age of hope is the age “When none defame us/No restriction tame us/ Nor colour shame us” (5-7). Stanza two makes clearer the argument raced in stanza two in the following:

The hope assigned you
    Shall the past replace
    When a juster justice
    Grown wise and stronger
    Points the bone no longer
    At a darker race (11-16).

In the movement of thought above, we sense the resolute search to freedom from the psychological captivity the people are engaged. The emergence of hope in the next line is obliged to “replace” that injured past that is hardly overwritten by other memories. The “juster justice” is the kind that is against the black race. This justice will shall no more point “At a darker race.”

In the search for primordial freedom, we see two events at the same time: the battered history in which the persona and his people make, and the kind of future which they wish to attain. In this poem thus is a movement from dystopia to utopia or from despair to hope. Using juxtaposition to contrast the two opposing events, the persona says: “So long we have waited/ Bound and frustrated/ Till hate be hated” (17-19). The hyperbolic preoccupation and the use of pun in the word “hate” brings the reader into the body of the “my people” of the poem whose history is interrogated here. He moves on to juxtapose this sense of despair with hope in a grand contrasting pattern by stating that:

    Now light shall guide us
    No goal denied us
    And all doors open
    That long were closed (21-24).

Also, in the fourth stanza, the evocation of hope drives he poem. The persona says that “New rights will greet us/ New mateship meet us/ And joy complete us” (29-31). The search for hope is what in the last line of the stanza referred to as “Dream Time.” The use of contrast features in the last stanza where he presents the grand parents and their long suffering and contrasts it with their children whom he wishes gladness. However, the quest for collective self freedom in this poem is a way of countering the socially-constructed story about them – the story that dislocates them from the fore of the society as a result of the colour of their skin. It is the society that places man under what Eagleton calls “ideological illusion” (544) of race.

Unbelongingness as Racial Othering

In the preface to the book, The Pain of Unbelonging: Alienation and Identity in Australasian Literature, Greer writes that politics of race results into the de-centering of the self from the core of the existence. There are those who only appear; instead of being in their environment. In this case, to appear is to made notice of; to be is to become a body of the functioning of the society. Greer calls this level of appearance unbelongingness. He writes that “[t]he true pain of unbelonging is felt by those who have no homeland and no diaspora, who do not belong where they are, and don’t belong anywhere else either” (x). In the elaboration of the argument, he states further that “Unbelonging hurts, but the pain is salutary. Belonging hurts, too, when what you belong to and what belongs to you is being withheld, exploited, undermined and destroyed. That pain is entirely destructive, toxic, relentless, maddening” (xi). Unbelongingness in the light of racial politics places one at the extreme end of their own world; one is thus “driven out of one’s spiritual landscape,… pushed from pillar to post at the constantly changing whim of an alien system, this pain of unbelonging is unbearable anguish” (Ibid).

In Noonuccal’s “No More Boomerang,” there is a level of functioning of racial politics which is read in the flow of thought in the persona. The poem is foregrounded with irony. The first stanza reads thus:

No more boomerang
    No more spear;
    Now all civilized-
    Colour bar and beer (1-4)
The poem opens by asserting that there is "no more boomerang" and "spear". The spear and boomerang metaphorically, in the light of both structural and semantic parallelism, present the preoccupation of hostility. In the third stanza is a sharp contrast that is only understood at a deeper level. It reads that everybody is now civilized. The collective civilization of the "all" is ironically twisted by the use of "colour bar" in the last line of the stanza. Colour bar is a social and legal system in which people from different racial backgrounds are stratified with unequal rights and opportunities. Colour bar as used in the line is satirically twisted in that if "all" are "civilized," there should not have been "color bar."

The coexistence of white and black excludes the latter from the civilization that has come. The persona gives us a sense of unbelonging; where the new materials in terms of civilization, are only enjoyed by the white. Rendered in the "We" collective personality, the personae argue that "Now we got movies,/ And pay to go in" (7-8). In the sixth stanza, the same unbelongingness is seen in the use of the derogatory expression "And work like a nigger/ For a white man meal." The use of the word "nigger" creates this exclusionary identity of the black man. It is the duty of the black man to work for the white man's sustenance and comfort. The instruction to the black man to "Lay down the stone axe,/ [and to] Take up the steel" (25-26) marks the idea of slavery and subservience. The black man lives and works in the interest of the white man; in the interest from which he does not benefit.

In the last stanza of the poem, there is the placing of side y side of two cultural form which are representative of the black and the white – firesticks and electricity. The sense of absence in quite prominent in the text but as we have stated above, the absence is ironically presence and blended in profound satirical composition as seen in the following stanza:

No more firesticks
That made the whites scoff
Now all electric,
And no better off (29-32)

The personae are associated with firesticks which are no more used because they make the "whites scoff." The introduction of materials that utilize electricity is not even "better off." This is because the black suffer as a result of their skin colour. This exclusionary politics is a continuation of racial politics which implicate man-to-man inhuman relationship. In Critical Race Theory, whiteness as property is here played, and thus, leads to permanence of racism.

In Noonuccal's poem, "We Are Going," there is a creation of racial binary system. There is the constant use of "they" in reference to the white whom the personae are apart from, and "we" in reference to the body in which the personae are. This is racial othering of people; and race is here a diminutive concept which undermines the people of colour.

This we - they racial paradigm plays on the word "strangers." The personae say that "We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers./ We belong here, we are of the old ways" (8-9). The blacks are the real owners of their land but they are only strangers in their own land. And the whites who are really strangers in the land are now seen as the original owners. The personae associating argues that they are "the old ceremonies; the laws of the elders" (11). The use of old ceremonies is associated with the "laws of the elders" in a grand semantic parallelism. The point of convergence of the two expressions is that they too point to the blacks as being the original owners of the land. This also echoes line 19 where the personae argue that they are "nature and the past, all the old ways."

Conclusion

The selected poetry of AudreLorde and OodgerooNoonuccal are loaded with patterns of racial politics. As we have above discussed, the poetry of Lorde is more of confrontational, interjectory, interrogatory and revolutionary. Noonuccal’s are mild and surreptitiously interrogate race by using associative sensitivity.
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