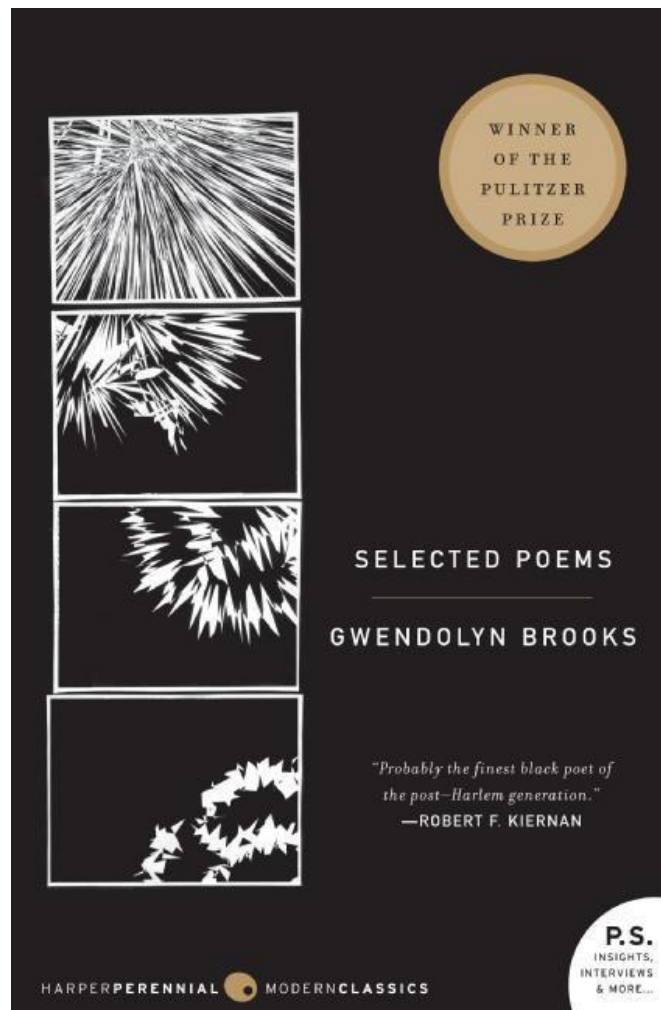


Image-Making and Image-Breaking – A Reading of African-American Poetry

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Abstract

Images are a powerful way of controlling reality. If they are positive in nature, they contribute in building the concept of self. Whereas, if they are portrayed negatively, they could prove to be destructive for the receivers. Images can be used to tell others what one thinks about oneself and others. This paper argues that whites have always used images negatively for the blacks. Whether in literature or popular imagination, blacks have been presented in dark colors. With the help of African-American poetry, the effort is to debunk those conventions. The paper also examines how these traditional images hamper the self-definition of the blacks and how black poets turn these images upside down to create a new and bold self. The result of this turning of the table is that the new negro is no longer bothered

by stereotypes related to him. After reading new poetry, he can also say that he is also a human being who has wishes and desires.

Keywords: African-Americans, Images, Image Making, Image Breaking, Black protest, New Negro, Black Selfhood, African-American poetry

White and Black Image Making

Carolyn F. Gerald in her essay “The Black Writer and His Role” published in 1969 explains the process of image making and image breaking in relation to White and Black writers. Her argument is that images are a way of controlling reality. For her, reality is how one sees the world around which is most of the times controlled by the image makers. According to her, images are of two types: real and created. Real images are the actual ones, whereas created images are the projection of man’s own views and beliefs on to the images. In the process, reality no longer remains reality, but a created reality; hence images no longer remain self -sustained rather they become anthropomorphic.

Anthropomorphic images are those into which the creator projects his own personality to achieve the desired results. For example, a rose is a rose. But, the creator can project it as a symbol of beauty, purity and freshness. This is something he wants to witness in women that’s why a rose is often given to her as a present. Man has always imposed his own wishes onto images that’s why the sun smiles, the wind rushes, the birds sing and the animals howl. This is indeed an example of distorted reality. These images reoccur with such consistency and conviction that they acquire the stature of absolute reality.

Images - Control Others’ Perception

Images are a way of controlling others’ perception of themselves. They are detrimental for the receivers, because they somehow steal substance out of them, whereas for the creators, these images perpetuate their concept of themselves. It gives them strength and dignity over others. For instance, Gerald states that blacks, in general, do not find themselves in cinema, posters and hoardings. They often find whites doing all kinds of things which are grand and glorious, and so they live their lives by proxy. Whenever they find themselves in any form of expression, they are either servile or imitating the whites. As a result, they are reduced to zero image.

A black girl strolling on highways often comes across billboards and pamphlets inundated with white girls. Her conception of herself is at once distorted. She is not able to think that she is beautiful too, because the creator of the image of white beauty has left no space for blackness. Gerald argues that there has been the presence of Black literature in America, but it has not been able to convince blacks about their manhood so far. Now is the time, as Gerald continues, bitterness should give way to wrath and sense of frustration should be replaced by a sense of power derived from a positive notion of themselves.

Writer – A Myth Maker and Image Controller

Gerald believes that a writer is a myth maker and image controller. She exhorts the black writers to come out of negative perceptions of themselves and their race. She writes:

These images must be mythically torn down, ritually destroyed. We cannot bury our heads before the existing body of myth, nor before our own Europeanization. Therefore, we cannot return nostalgically to a past heritage and pretend that historical continuity exists in anything but fragmentary form. (Ervin 133)

To illustrate, Gerald quotes a beautiful poem which shatters the beauty associated with the Europeanized Muse who is always white, she quotes:

Dress the muse in black
No!
Kill her!
Make her jump
Burning bright white bitch
From the pitched peaks of our houses. (Ervin 133)

Focus of This Paper

This paper aims to analyze poems chosen randomly from African – American poetry with a view to see how it debunks existing dominant images. The effort is to pin point the nature of the images that are broken with their psychological impact and to further argue how a new concept of self takes birth.

Images Circulated by the Whites

Before a detailed analysis of African American poetry from above said perspective is undertaken, it would be pertinent to first have a look at the kind of images circulated by whites. The most prominent example is that of a nursery rhyme entitled “Ten Little Nigger Boys”. This poem was extremely popular in post-bellum America. The white kids were made to memorize it and the black kids also enjoyed it. The text of the poem is as under:

Ten little nigger boys went out to dine;
One choked his little self, and then there were nine.
Nine little nigger boys sat up very late;
One overslept himself, and then there were eight.

Eight little nigger boys traveling in Devon;
One said he'd stay there, and then there were seven.
Seven little nigger boys chopping up sticks;
One chopped himself in half, and then there were six.
Six little nigger boys playing with a hive;
A bumble-bee stung one, and then there were five.
Five little nigger boys going in for law;
One got in chancery, and then there were four.
Four little nigger boys going out to sea;
A red herring swallowed one, and then there were three.
Three little nigger boys walking in the zoo;
A big bear hugged one, and then there were two.
Two little nigger boys sitting in the sun;
One got frizzled up, and then there was one.
One little nigger boy living all alone;
He got married, and then there were none. [N. P.]

Negative Portrayal of Blacks

This poem is indeed of a destructive in nature. This poem might have had negative impact on the growth of blacks. After the slavery was over, whites in south could not see blacks as free. They were in favor of bondage. For them, a free black man was an alien idea. They were of the opinion that

if blacks were given their freedom, they will not be able to handle it. This poem corroborates this stand point.

Here the blacks are shown roaming aimlessly. They are not able to utilize their time. They kill each other, they go to zoo and are embraced by animals hence proving that animals aeach other without any justification. They hang themselves because they cannot do any other thing, in short, they are not presented as doing any productive work.

After reading such a poem, blacks surely might have received a negative perception about themselves. Wherever they went, they could find the dark image being portrayed in a negative way. For example, in hotel windows, they could see themselves as dummies with wide grin and a servile bow to every passerby. The books written by white authors always presented them as “Uncle Tom, and Uncle Sambo.” All this surely might have forced them to think about themselves as less than human beings. It would have surely destroyed their concept of self-hood.

Pernicious Notions of Beauty

Moreover, the very idea of beauty was also pernicious for the blacks’ concept of self in America. They were always made to think that black is ugly. Everywhere, they come across many examples of white beauty. The image of beauty was white skin and blonde hair. From posters to theater, from bill-boards to cinema, only this image was glorified. Where ever they go, they are haunted by their own skin color. All the love and attention was captured by whites, while they wait in futility. This also harmed their concept of self. They started thinking that they were not worth anything. Because they do not fit into the definition of beauty, their sense of self was fractured.

Jesus Christ is Black

For instance, “Christ in Alabama” by Langston Hughes makes the case for destructive quality of whiteness associated with God. This poem shatters the holiness attached to Christ and anticipates Christ being a black figure. Whenever blacks go to church, they find the presence of a white God. It is emblematic of whites’ hegemony. Alice Walker highlights the destructive quality of the white God in *The Color Purple*. Her central character Celie says that the white God never listens to black women’s cry. Had He listened to the cries of black women, this world would have been a better place to live in. Shug, her best friend, also believes that white God present in churches is just like another white man. He is white- faced, white-beard, white- haired and white-robed.

Langston Hughes turns this image of the white son of white God upside down. He disrobes Christ of His glory by portraying him as black. He even asserts that had Christ been born in Alabama and had He been black, He would have been beaten black and blue. The very fact of white God being white emphasizes the superiority and dominance of whites. Hughes, in his bitter but humorous tone breaks this image from within. He writes:

Most holy bastard
Of the bleeding mouth,
Nigger Christ
On the cross
Of the South. (Harper and Walton 143)

Portrayal of Black Women

Likewise, Gwendolyn Brooks in “Sadie and Maud” breaks the negativity attached with the image of black women in the dominant culture. In white culture, a black woman is often perceived as a helpless victim. She is either a mammy figure feeding white children or a mistress doing anything

for the sake of money. Whenever she is portrayed with her own family, she is viewed as a burden and a harbinger of trouble. Any black girl would have definitely felt belittled and down-graded after coming across such negative assumptions of her own self. Gwendolyn Brooks challenges this image prevalent in dominant culture.

She portrays a family with a father, mother, brother and a sister in “Sadie and Maud.” She presents Maud, the brother as a lover of education. He attends college whereas his sister Sadie gets no chance to go out and study. She stays back at home and busies herself with her tooth-comb. She has nothing to do except combing her hair. As a result, she has no tangled hair. She is loved and desired by all. Finally, she falls in love with someone and becomes a mother. Everyone starts looking down upon her because she is an unwed mother. Even her brother and parents disown her.

She is left alone with her children. She decides to hire a home of her own to live her life. She is not dependent on others. She is a brave girl. She is not someone who would shout and curse others. She never blames anyone. She is self-reliant; she is a woman with an iron-will. She might be bent but not broken. She does not need others if they don’t need her. She decides to take care of her children, family or no family. Brooks portrays her with a view to instill confidence and courage among black women in the 1960s when Civil Rights Movement was in its full swing. She writes:

Maud, who went to college,
Is a thin brown mouse.
She is living all alone
In this old house. (Harper and Walton 185)

A Counter Narrative

Similarly, Ishmael Reed in “.05” presents a counter-narrative of the image of black man as presented in the dominant culture. In the whites’ world, black men are portrayed as servants; they did work as servants in the early days of their emancipation. They are, most of the time, shown as flunkies, butlers, drivers, porters, cobblers and waiters. The most recurring image is that of a share cropping farmer, ignorant duns and unwise citizen. He is often perceived as a gambler, drunkard and irresponsible person. He has no learning, and hence no sense. Reed cracks this image. With the force of his pen, he recreates an image which is positive and full of life. His protagonist has a dream. He plays with the possibilities.

According to Harper and Walton: “Reed’s poetry, like his prose, uses parody and satire as vehicles for the investigation of African and African American folk experience as read against the grain of both popular culture and myth”. (283) He speaks, no doubt, dreams big. He is not dreaming of becoming a driver or a waiter. His idea of himself is not limited. He imagines himself in two possibilities. Firstly, he thinks that if he had money for all the women who rejected him, he would have been the head of the World Bank. He would have servants to hold his hat while boarding a chartered jet to sign checks for India.

Secondly, he perceives that if he had money to give all his beloved, he would have been the assistant or a janitor in the World Bank itself. Instead of flying to India, he would have thought of coming back home. In both the possibilities, the protagonist is a dreamer. He is a visionary. He thinks big of himself. He believes in his aptitude; he does not doubt his potentials. His idea of self is not limited to manual labor. His thinking is not controlled by popular images. He imagines something big for his own self. This is how Reed pens it:

If I had a nickel for
All the women who’ve loved

Me in my life I would be
The World Bank's assistant
Janitor and wouldn't need
To wear a derby
All I'd think about would
Be going home. (Harper and Walton 284)

Another Positive Representation: Jail Poems

Bob Kauffman, one of the Beats poets, in one of his Jail Poems "1," argues for yet another positive representation. The protagonist in the poem is a prisoner. He is unlike any other black prisoner in mainstream literature. He is not a peace-breaker. He is not someone who abuses. He is not like those notorious criminals who raise everything on their heads. He is a thinking being. He is conscious of his surroundings; he contemplates like intellectuals. His idea of self is not determined by someone else. He identifies with the other prisoners, but never shouts like them. He can interpret things around him. He knows what is happening.

For him, the clattering of criminals is better than the humming of police inspectors. The way he reflects upon everything is indeed praiseworthy. He ends up in jail like other Beat participants for challenging the mainstream culture. The very fact that he has challenged the mainstream culture by creating and participating in a sub-culture, is powerful enough to categorize him as an image breaker. His conduct is described in a vivid and graphic manner. For example:

I am sitting in a cell with a view of evil parallels
Waiting thunder to splinter me into a thousand me's.
It is not enough to be in one cage with one self;
I want to sit opposite every prisoner in every hole. (Harper and Walton 199)

Breaking the Traditional Image of the Blacks

Amiri Baraka, popularly known as LeRoi Jones, also breaks the traditional image patterns related to negroes as being dull and foolish. He is not carried away by the popular notion demonstrated in white culture that all blacks are dumb. He presents a persona who is imaginative and creative. He has his own perceiving self. He has potentials of becoming an artist. He is blessed with intuition and imagination which are prerequisite for becoming an artist. He is not a machine who is programmed to say yes sir and no sir. He has a dreaming self that dreams every day. He has lost his father; like any other son, he misses him badly.

He goes every morning to Gansevoort St. He stands on the dock there and stares hard at the horizon. Finally, the moment comes. The horizon overpowers him; it engulfs him and he thinks that his father has embraced him. This is imagination at its most creative best. That's how art usually operates. Nothing is transformed into something; Ordinary becomes extraordinary; the common is metamorphosed into the uncommon. Baraka writes:

I stare out
At the horizon
Until it gets up
And comes to embrace me.
I make believe
It is my father.
This is known
As genealogy. (Harper and Walton 230)

To Conclude

To conclude, it can safely be argued that black poetry, particularly after the 1920s is constantly in the process of breaking stereotypes. Almost all the poets, discussed above, are in the process of developing a counter narrative to shape the consciousness of blacks. Sometimes, they challenge it from within, sometimes they question it from a distance; sometimes they fracture it directly and at other times, they develop altogether different models. Their desire is to impart positive sense of self to Afro-Americans which has been taken away from them and to achieve this, they create wonderful poetry.

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