

BLACK FEMINISM IN SELECTED POEMS BY AUDRE LORDE AND LUCILLE CLIFTON

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to find the struggles of black women against oppression and beauty standards that appear in the poetry of Audre Lorde and Lucille Clifton. In this study, the researcher analyzed two poems from each of the two poets in a way; the first is how black women fight oppression and beauty standards by examining the ideas and history of black feminists in the US in order to obtain extrinsic elements of poetry. And the second, analyzing the intrinsic elements in the poetry to find the figurative language and imagery used in these poems. Data were analyzed by the resistance theory of black women by Patricia Hills Collins. Another theory is figurative language and imagery by Ruth Miller and Robert A. Greenberg. The data is produced from words, phrases and sentences that relation to the black feminism as the struggle of black women resist oppression and standard beauty that contain in the poems. The first way to resistance is Self-Definition, Self-Respect, Self-Independence, and Personal Empowerment mentioned by Collins. Then, in the poems uses figurative language such as metaphor, simile and personification. Imagery also includes visual, tactile and aural. Finally, the conclusion that can be drawn is that the findings above prove that the poetry of Audre Lorde and Lucille Clifton is the struggle of black women against injustice.

Key words: Black Women, Black Feminism, Controlling Images, Positive Self-Esteem, Poetry.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menemukan perjuangan perempuan kulit hitam melawan penindasan dan standar kecantikan yang muncul dalam puisi Audre Lorde dan Lucille Clifton. Dalam penelitian ini, peneliti menganalisis dua puisi dari masing-masing dua penyair tersebut dengan cara; Pertama, bagaimana perempuan kulit hitam melawan penindasan dan standar kecantikan dengan mengkaji gagasan dan sejarah feminis kulit hitam di AS untuk mendapatkan unsur ekstrinsik puisi. Dan yang kedua, menganalisis elemen intrinsik dalam puisi untuk menemukan bahasa kiasan dan perumpamaan yang digunakan dalam puisi tersebut. Data dianalisis dengan teori resistensi perempuan kulit hitam oleh Patricia Hills Collins. Teori lain adalah bahasa kiasan dan perumpamaan oleh

Ruth Miller dan Robert A. Greenberg. Data tersebut dihasilkan dari kata, frase dan kalimat yang berkaitan dengan feminisme kulit hitam sebagai perjuangan perempuan kulit hitam melawan penindasan dan standar kecantikan yang terkandung dalam puisi. Cara pertama untuk melawan adalah Definisi Diri, Harga Diri, Kemandirian, dan Pemberdayaan Pribadi yang disebutkan oleh Collins. Kemudian dalam puisi menggunakan bahasa kiasan seperti metafora, simile dan personifikasi. Perumpamaan juga mencakup visual, taktil, dan aural. Akhirnya kesimpulan yang dapat ditarik adalah temuan di atas membuktikan bahwa puisi Audre Lorde dan Lucille Clifton adalah perjuangan perempuan kulit hitam melawan ketidakadilan.

Kata kunci: *Perempuan kulit hitam, feminisme kulit hitam, pengendalian visual, penghargaan diri yang positif, puisi.*

A. Introduction

Women are equal with men in all fields, in education, economy, role in society, politics, and also have the right to be given the opportunity to do jobs that are usually done by men. However, the patriarchy is a social system that places men as the main power and dominates in the roles of political leadership, moral authority, social rights and control of property. Thus, feminism as a women's movement demands that women must be given the right and treated the same as human being to develop their knowledge and moral capacities such as providing equal access to education, and having choice of opportunities to work or stay at home, as well as having the same political rights as men. Black women are often considered to have no beauty standard or beautiful in the view of society as they get different treatment when compared to white women. In contrast, society gives the privilege to white women as woman's beauty standard. Therefore, it is very important for black women to instill confidence, pride, and give a good image in society. Through black feminism, it remains important because U.S. black women constitute an oppressed group. As long as black women's subordination, within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed (Collins 22).

The researcher chooses two poets from African-American women with each of two poems from them. The researcher chooses these poems because the poems were written by black female poets who raised issues about black women from their experience. Thus, connection between the poems and the theory black feminism that would be discussed is the struggle of black women against oppression and standard of beauty that still occur in the world. The first is Audre Lorde (1934-1992) with her poems *a Woman Speaks* and *Now*. The second is Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) *Won't You Celebrtae with Me* and *Homage to My Hips*.

B. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter the researcher used some of theories. The first one is poetry, poetry is any kind of verbal or written language that is structured rhythmically and

is meant to tell a story, or express any kind of emotion, idea, or state of being. Poetry is used to achieve this artistic expression in several ways (Ollila and Jantas 1). There are two elements that construct the literary work, especially in the poetry. The first is intrinsic element of poetry, it is an element contained in a poem which is used by researcher in studying and understanding the meaning of a poem. The intrinsic elements that analyzed are figurative language and imagery. Meanwhile, the extrinsic element of poetry is a supporting element of poetry that comes from outside the work of poetry created. Some elements of extrinsic poem are like author biography, social background, religion, and education of the author, and social circumstances at the time the poem was made (Rizal 6-7). The second theory is black feminism in Thought of Black Feminism by Patricia Hill Collins. Collins believes that black feminism as women who theorized the experiences and ideas that shared by ordinary black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community and society (56). Therefore, Black feminists speak about the double minority being both, black and female. Patricia Hill Collins suggested that the highly negative images of Black women almost need that their efforts to develop “positive self-images” become acts of resistance or social rebellion (95).

According to Collins, the work of Black women writers provided the context for creating alternatives to prevailing images of Black womanhood. These sites offered “safe spaces” that nurtured the everyday and specialized thought of African-American women. Black women intellectuals could construct ideas and experiences that infused daily life with new meaning and Collins believe these new meanings offered African-American women potentially powerful tools to resist the controlling images of Black womanhood (112). The persistence of these four ideas about realization, the importance of self-definition, the significance of self-valuation and respect, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment. **Self-definition** involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood. Self-Definition or gives meaning or a label to ourselves, for black women it aims to reject the assumptions from other people that give negative images to black women (114). **Self-Respect** can help others to see and treat with dignity and worth from each other. Collins says the emphasis that Black feminist thinkers have placed on respect illustrates the significance of self-valuation. In a society in which no one is obligated to respect African-American women, they have long admonished one another to have self-respect and to demand the respect of others. Black women’s voices from a variety of sources reflect this demand for respect (115). **The Self- Reliance and Independence** is the trusts of your ability to get through the challenges of life and not depending on any one person. Self-reliance was especially instilled in them because of their dual identities as African Americans and as women. **Personal Empowerment** can develop confidence and strength. Empowerment usually concern making some basic changes in life to set positive goals fulfill your potential. Collins explains if a critical mass of individuals with a changed consciousness can in turn foster black women’s collective empowerment. A changed consciousness encourages people to change the conditions of their lives (117).

C. Research Method

The method of this research was qualitative research. Qualitative research was characterized by an interpretative paradigm, which emphasizes subjective experiences and the meanings they have for an individual. Therefore, the subjective views of a researcher on a particular situation play a vital part in the study results. Another characteristic of qualitative research is its idiographic approach (Qtd. Starman30). The researcher used Feminist theory as the approach for analyzed the data and literary criticism for the analysis. According to Abrams, literary criticism was the overall term for studies concerned with defining, classifying analyzing, interpreting and evaluating works of literature. On the other hand, literary theory was the theory that guides those that criticize people works (Abrams 61). The researcher also used extrinsic elements and intrinsic elements to help the researcher analyzed the poems. There are five steps to analyze the data. The first was reading the types of feminism like black feminism that contain black women's struggle against oppression and standard of beauty that related to the poems. Next, the researcher read and explicated each poem to identify the meaning and determining the lines in every stanza that would be analyzed. The third was by giving marks the kinds resistance of black woman, figurative languages and imagery that used in the poems. And then, the researcher proved that there were the resistances of black feminist in these poems by examined the history of black feminists in the U.S. that supported this analysis in order to obtained extrinsic elements, and then the figurative language and imagery obtained the intrinsic elements in the poems. The last step was drawing conclusion based on the description which have been done to get the last result.

D. Findings and Discussions

In this chapter, the researcher gives explanation to answer the research of the study. The researcher analyzed the four poems by explaining the extrinsic elements contained in the poem that proves the existence of black feminists who resist against the oppression and beauty standard of black women to answer the first problem of the study. And for the second problem of the study, the researcher analyzed the intrinsic elements contained in the poem. The intrinsic that the researcher use are figurative language and imagery to symbolize the struggle against the oppression and beauty standard of black women.

1. Black Feminism in the Poems

a. *A Woman Speaks* by Audre Lorde

Lorde writes about her bravery to define herself as she say the beautiful creature as beautiful as the full moon in the dark night it refers to black woman in the first line (Self-Definition). For the second line, when black women itself have hidden power which like the truly beauty, pride and kindness is actually not written in history or not considered by people in society in the past. That is why white people just write the black women's bitterness and fact that is untrue to treat bad and underestimate to them. The third and fourth lines showing the condition when

the time goes on and go back to remember the things that hurt, it will leave the marks of experience and incidents that happened in the past to black women.

Moon marked and touched by sun
my magic is unwritten
but when the sea turns back
it will leave my shape behind. (1-4)

b. *Now* by Audre Lorde

The researcher analyzes the second poem by Audre Lorde, *Now*. In general, the poem expresses Audre Lorde's pride and confidence as a black woman. In the first until the sixth line, she defines herself as black woman that has a power with so much strength to face the world that had so many discrimination and racism with their identity as black woman. With the words "is" it is connected the ideas about being woman, black and powerful that is very important to resist the injustice in the society (Self-Definition).

Woman power
Is
Black power
Is
Human power
Is (1-6)

c. *Homage To My Hips* by Lucille Clifton

In the first until third line the part of body black women themselves are said to have a bigger body and far from ideal like white women in society. Because of the size of black women's hips are larger than ordinary women supposed to be, in the fourth until fifth line she explains that her body was big, any dress or clothes with ideal size white women used is not enough for her. With her confident way, she tells her beauty is not about her face on body's size, her beauty is about being confident about self to make this perception to the society that black women also beauty as other women (Self-Definition and Self-Respect). Yet, it does not make black women itself not confident, it makes her confident by freeing whatever she uses and do what they want to do and no one can stop them in the sixth and seventh line (Self-Respect).

these hips are big hips
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back (1-7)

d. *Won't You Celebrate with Me* by Lucille Clifton

In the sixth until ninth lines have in common conditions at the time that black women have to struggle and survive. The black woman itself cannot imagine what will happen at that time, yet the survival in the word “i made it up” itself is form of resistance and the struggle of these action finally can do something better which now she shines celebrate her glory and she proceeded to make her life better (Personal Empowerment).

what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay, (6-9)

2. Figurative Languages and Imagery in the Poems

a. *A Woman Speaks* by Audre Lorde

The idea in the fifth until the ninth lines is about underestimation and hatred of society that treat her bad. The word “blood” is imagery of visual and used as metaphor can be interpreted one of the compounds of human formation, which is why she said “untouched by blood” means that bad people think black women are not human from of the word “untouched”. And then, Lorde also uses simile in the words “as the curse of love” which means wretch or something despicable being loved that society judge to black women, followed by the other simile words such like “permanent as my error” means all the mistakes that happen just because black women born and make them hurt their pride.

I seek no favor
untouched by blood
unrelenting as the curse of love
permanent as my errors
or my pride (5-9)

b. *Now* by Audre Lorde

In this stanza explains about this woman that can always resist the injustice as long as she is alive from the metaphor word “heart beats”. It also followed by other simile words such “as my eyes open” that means the things that can be seen with human eyes. It is as the vision to see the truth. She states “as my hands move” that means she can do something to take action and movement, and “as my mouth speaks” which means to tell the truth about a black woman with the rejection from the society.

always feeling
my heart beats
as my eyes open
as my hands move
as my mouth speaks (7-11)

c. *Homage To My Hips* by Lucille Clifton

In the fifteenth line she uses simile “spin him like a top” which means for being able to rotate a man like a top toy. It also means that without the need to have the beauty that everyone wants, she chooses to be comfortable with her inner power and unique beauty that can far more attractive to many men without having to be controlled by them.

i have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top! (11-15)

d. *Won't You Celebrate with Me* by Lucille Clifton

In the lines of the sixth to seventh she explains that she does not expect much from the situation at that time, but she does not give up and continues to fight all forms of injustice that she has received until finally she manages to do it as she says “i made it up”. Clifton makes a parable using the metaphor as in the word “bridge” means it connects which are in different and it enables help to be connected. “Starshine” used to mean as something that has been achieved like glory and “clay” literally meaning wet lumps, but with love, skill and effort can be transformed into incredible things, so it can be something useful and beautiful. There are three visual imagery words such like “bridge”, “starshine” and “clay”.

what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay, (6-9)

E. Conclusions

Based on the findings and discussion in the previous chapter, the four poems have the same goal. It start with the struggle of black women to resist the injustice, oppression and the standard of beauty in both of Audre Lorde's poems and one of Lucille Clifton's poem entitled *Won't You Celebrate with Me*. Meanwhile, Clifton's second poem, *Homage to My Hips* is against the standard of beauty that given only to the white women. With self-respect, it can change the way of thinking to see self-beauty which becomes a powerful empowerment for black women. With the changes and the resistance that black women made, it helps them to feel free and appreciated. They do not need to be afraid of being oppressed and underestimate again. The researcher finds the intrinsic elements of these poems are figurative language and imagery. Meanwhile, the extrinsic elements of these poems that the researcher finds are about the biography, social background of life and environment of the poets. These four poems gave ideas to black women to do things better, learning that involves themselves and do not hesitate to appreciate themselves in order no one can underestimates or oppresses them. That all makes them have a fair life and have equal rights in society.

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