

**"...I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',"**

**The Black Mother in the Poetry of
Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson,
Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni**

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by

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled "...I'se still goin', honey, I'se still climbin',"--The Black Mother in the Poetry of Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni" has been written by me under the supervision of Dr. Alladi Uma, Department of English, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.

I also declare that this dissertation is the result of my own effort and has not been submitted to any other university for any degree or diploma.

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To

Uma Maheshari

for

bringing so much joy and fulfilment
into my life

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Since in these days, the writer is dead once he/she finishes writing, I accept my demise joyfully and leave the rest to the readers.

Preface

Studying poetry has always been a formidable albeit a challenging exercise for me. Especially African-American poetry, with its complex history and a galaxy of gigantic creative personalities, makes me feel terribly inferior and ill-equipped. But again, poetry is a unique art because it alone can capture the intricacies of the human heart in such a short space. A poem not only lives because of its openness to interpretation but because the emotion it embodies operates at a non-verbal level. Poetry is difficult to handle, especially in academic exercises like the present dissertation where "method" rules the roost, because it is a verbal expression of things which are beyond words. African-American poetry amply proves this point. My attempt has been at capturing the core emotions of the poems that I have chosen, verbally, of course. I cannot make the claim of having done a profound study for the simple reason that I am culturally alien to the African-American community and my knowledge of it has been acquired mainly through reading various books. However, I must say that I have made my sincerest effort in this exercise.

The four poets I have chosen, Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni are individuals with different approaches to their art and, of course, to their own lives. At the same time, they have some similarities in terms of their thematic content. This combination of differences

and similarities attracted me when I read these poets.

I have chosen "Black Mother" as my focus because, the concept is as complex as it is variegated. Hughes' delineation of it is considerably different from that of Johnson although both of them celebrate the sacrificial and courageous nature of the Black Mother in their poetry. Nikki Giovanni, on the other hand, has a multi-angled approach and understanding of the importance of Motherhood as opposed to the patriarchal and male-centred attitude of Amiri Baraka.

Personally, I feel that it is difficult to do justice to a comparative study of four such different poets within the limitations of a thesis. I am aware of the question that crops up: why then, have I chosen these four poets? I have selected these poets for two reasons. One, out of my sheer love for their poetry (in spite of certain reservations) and two, it would be exciting, I thought, to bring together people who lived in different periods under different influences and examine their creative art. I must also say that the initial excitement of such projects is disproportionate to the subsequent agony in making it an academic exercise. At more than one instance have I restrained myself from bringing all the poets together, for fear of making this thesis unwieldy and confusing. That is also the reason for choosing two poets of each period viz., the Harlem Renaissance and the era of the Black Power movement at a time.

I must say that studying these poets, trying to understand them and commenting on them have been an enlightening experience. At the same time, there is always this nagging pain in the heart at the mysterious oppressive tendencies of human beings. I wish the world had taken Langston Hughes' "Advice:"

Folks, I'm telling you,
birthing is hard
and dying is mean--
so get yourself
a little loving
in between. (1990, 237)

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Chapter 1

In Search of the Mother's Position

Our females must be qualified because they are to be the mothers of our children. As mothers are the first nurse and instructors of children, from them children consequently get their first impression, which being always the most lasting, should be the more correct.

(Martin Delaney qtd. in bell hooks, Ain't I a Woman?, 1981, 89; emphasis added.)

"Motherhood," in African-American community, has been more than a biological function. It has been a familial commitment, a social responsibility, and, above all, a symbol of the cultural continuum of a displaced people. The African-American Mother (for the sake of convenience, I shall call her Black Mother from now on) is an all-encompassing phenomenon. She epitomizes black history, black culture, black heritage and above all the heroic struggle of her race for human dignity and equality in a racist, capitalist society. In short, the saga of African-Americans is the saga of the Black Mother.

The statement in the epigraph by Martin Dalaney is interesting for two reasons: one, it represents the typical black male perspective of a woman's role as mother; two, it nevertheless makes clear the supreme importance of the Black

Mother in the nurturing of the African-American community. The statement, no doubt, has a tone of hierarchy--"they are to be the mothers of our children"--but it also betrays the undeniable dependence of black people as a community on the Black Mother. ✓ It may not be entirely incorrect to think that Delaney's statement elaborates what Sarah Dudley Pettey crisply puts: "Men go from home into the world to execute what women have decreed" (qtd. in Neverdon-Morton 1978, 44). Pettey is more straight and honest than Delaney who clings to male superiority.

Black Mother is no goddess. I use capitals "B" and "M" only to emphasize her humanity, because she exemplifies the triumph of human spirit over the worst possible persecution in the history of mankind and because she always led from the front, whether she is the unacknowledged mother of Alice Walker who lived her creativity¹ or that bold woman called Rosa Parks² who had ushered in a new era in the African-American struggle for equality.

If Black Mother is the tree, Black Woman is the root. Understanding Motherhood is impossible without understanding Womanhood. Before one ventures into the complexity of Black Motherhood, one needs to understand Black Womanhood. In the words of Andrea Benton Rushing, "black women function as metaphors for salient aspects of the black experience!..." (1978, 74) in America. The location of black women in the American social hierarchy is peculiar. They face multi-layered oppression, as blacks and as women. They are discriminated against on the basis of their skin by both white men and white women. And then they have to fight sexism from both black and white men. Above all, they have the tortuous choice to make

between fighting for the race against racism and fighting as women against sexism. One wonders if W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" can comprehensively explain the complexity of the black woman's condition. One feels that black women live in a state of "multi consciousness." They have to define themselves at many levels--firstly, as black women vis-a-vis black men and white men, secondly, as black people vis-a-vis white people and thirdly, as women vis-a-vis men. These multiple frames of reference make assertion of their identity the most difficult task. In addition to these, whatever is expected of them as "mothers" makes their lives a formidable challenge. African-American history offers numerous examples of black women who have faced these challenges courageously and have emerged triumphant.

Black women, when they become mothers, realize one important fact, that they have to be more aware of the American reality than the American dream. The reality is that America is a predominantly white, racist, capitalist society, and bringing a child into that world would mean getting ready to expose it to discrimination and oppression. The greatness of Black Motherhood lies in the fact that even when hope has been denied to black women, they have the greatest weapon against that denial i.e., spiritual strength. Cornel West points this fact out in his insightful work Race Matters:

The psychic bouts with self-confidence, the existential agony over genuine desirability, and the social burden of bearing and usually nurturing black children under these circumstances breeds a

spiritual strength of black women
 unbeknownst to most black men and nearly
 all other Americans.

(1994, 130, emphasis added)

It is important to notice in the above observation that Motherhood is called a "burden." It is a burden because, as Johnetta B. Cole rightly points out, "[a]mong the rules of patriarchy are that all women are to be mothers" (Preface, 1991, xiv-xv), rule applies to black and white women equally. In the case of white women this burden is not as crushing as it is in the case of black women owing to the latter's subjection to multi-layered oppression. This is a fact that American history cannot afford to forget.

During the Middle Passage, many African women gave birth to their children in the "scalding perspiration from the human cargo" (Frazier 1966, 35). The way in which they were bought and sold in the American slave markets as "breeders" almost smothered whatever genuine motherly feelings they had in their hearts.

For the black women in Africa, Motherhood was more or less shaped by their culture. However, this does not mean that even their love was only a cultural construct. Many mothers in Africa "offered themselves to the slave raiders in order to save their sons, and... refused food during famines until their children were fed" (Frazier 1966, 34). African mothers' love for their progeny was exceptional but the American slave markets deeply bruised their emotional constitutions.

Life, for black women especially was miserable during the days of slavery in America. The word "woman" referred only to

the white woman and the black women, along with their men were treated as "sub-humans." And they were assigned all kinds of excruciating physical tasks like carrying loads of corn and rice. Interestingly, very rarely does one come across instances where black men took up the responsibility of household duties like looking after the children etc. Black women performed the men's tasks whereas the men seldom reciprocated because Motherhood was considered basically a female function.

Black women were oppressed, exploited and were left to fend for themselves and their children during slavery. Motherhood was something to reckon with for black women. Many women lost their children due to malnutrition whereas many more had seen their children being sold away in the markets and disappearing forever. Women and children were sparsely fed and the children were barely clothed. In an atmosphere of such barbaric subjugation, it was impossible for any mother to accept Motherhood happily; and it is of little wonder that Motherhood was considered a pathway to greater affliction. In most cases Motherhood was either an imposition of the circumstances or a demand from a system that treated black women as "breeders." The relationship between the mother and the child could not afford to be a clear one. Where Motherhood was more an inevitability than a choice, the experience of it tended to be ambiguous. It was neither complete happiness nor complete sorrow. It was a painfully ambivalent state of mind. Noted sociologist Franklin E. Frazier opined:

where slave women were maintained as breeders and enjoyed certain indulgences and privileges because of their position,

the experience of pregnancy and childbirth was likely to cause them to look upon their children as the source of these favours.

(1966, 36)

One wonders if, as Frazier says, black women ever enjoyed those so-called "indulgences" and "privileges" (if they can be called "indulgences" and "privileges" at all) but there is every understandable reason for the changes in the complexion of their idea of Motherhood.

The most important reason is the cultural displacement. Black people and especially black women had lost their racial and cultural roots once they were transported to the New World. This violent extirpation of their roots necessitated a redefinition of identity in an alien land. For black women Motherhood was no longer shaped by any longstanding customs but was mutilated by the shocking humiliation of slavery. During slavery in America black women begot children mostly to be sold away. So Motherhood in majority of the cases was less an emotional experience than an organisational requirement in the large system of slavery.

For many black women Motherhood was a consequence of sexual assaults by their white masters. Black women during slavery were treated as the dumping grounds for the sexual perversions of their masters. As maids and house-servants black women were always at the mercy of their masters and more often than not were compelled and forced to comply with their sexual advances. Children born out of many such agonising unions had an ambiguous identity and suffered untold miseries. On the other hand, the constant association of black women with white households

enabled the masters to stereotype the black women. Walker observes in a tone of sardonic anger:

When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. (1983, 237)

Walker is addressing both the white and the black communities because stereotyping women is basically a patriarchal trait. The power of white stereotyping has been strong enough even to penetrate the black male psyche.

One such complex stereotype is that of the Negro Mammy. In the words of Frazier,

...the idealized picture of the Negro Mother has not grown out of the stories of her sacrifices and devotion to her own children but has emerged from the tradition of the Negro mammy, a romantic figure in whom maternal love as a vicarious sentiment has become embodied.

(1966, 33; emphasis added)

The Mammy figure is always portrayed as a strong, resilient, big-bosomed and cantankerously voluble woman whose love for her white master's children is natural. She also accepts her role in the white familial structure quite happily and contentedly. From

fiction by white writers like Margaret Mitchell (in *Gone with the Wind*) to innumerable television soap-operas and Hollywood films, the Negro Mammy has dominated the White perception of Black Motherhood.⁴

There might have been instances of some black women showing great love and affection toward their masters' children. Those cases, however, cannot be taken as truthful representations of black women's love for white children. Susan Sneedes, a white writer quoted by Frazier, justifies the stereotype in her work titled *A Southern Planter*. She narrates an incident where a black mother worried herself more over the illness of her mistress's child than her own sick child in spite of the mistress's exhortations. She declares that the "devotion of the nurses [black women] of these foster-children was greater than their love for their own" (1966, 33).

Edward Said, in his path-breaking *Orientalism*, coined a nice phrase for this practice in a context which may be different from this thematically but nevertheless the same in content. It is called "positional superiority" (1978, 7). Just as the colonizing West's economic and political superiority enabled it to create bodies of knowledge about the East and perpetuate it as the "Truth," (1978, 7) the White majority in the United States had the "positional superiority" to create "truths" about the black minority especially black women and to call it the truth. In this context it would be interesting to remember one of the lines from a Sonia Sanchez poem titled "Introduction (Queens of the Universe):"

Contentment will never
be ours for this crackerized country has dealt
on us and colonized us body and soul...

(1974, 12, 34-36 emphasis added)

Susan Smedes exemplifies this practice. The creation of stereotypes like the Negro Mammy and their recurrent reinforcement definitely contributed to the perpetuation of white racism and patriarchy.

However, essentializations and sweeping generalisations would only mean distorting and decontextualizing the history of Black Motherhood. Herbert G. Gutman in his much acclaimed The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 provides us with an example, the kind of which would help us counter such stereotyping. Gutman quotes a letter by a slave mother, Hannah Grover (aka Hannah Van Buskerk), to her son Cato on June 3, 1805. The letter says:

Now my dear son I pray you to come and see
your dear old Mother--or send me twenty
dollar and I will come and see you in
Philadelphia. And if you can't come to see
your old Mother pray send me a letter and
tell me where you live what family you have
and what you do for a living.... I love you
Cato you love your Mother--you are my only
son.

(1976, 4)

Examples like this are numerous which need to be used to debunk white stereotyping of Black Motherhood.

Besides the positional superiority of the white people there is another possible reason for the creation of stereotypes like the Mammy, i.e., the apparent coldness and resilience of the black women. We have to remember again that black women lived in sub-human conditions in an alien land. The inordinate cruelty of a system like slavery had its own ramifications. In the case of black women slavery "schooled" them in "self-reliance and self-sufficiency" (Frazier 1966, 102). Black women have always been economically independent of their men. Even after Emancipation, they continued to work to feed themselves and their children. The bottom line is that they have always been out there, in the middle of white-black interaction. They knew the hardships and the sheer agony of getting ahead against racism, sexism and material greed. The practicalities of leading a life amidst hostile environment had given the black women great psychological strength (what Cornel West was talking about). This strength made them resilient to odds. And the white world immediately called them a "Matriarchs." Not only matriarchs but also "Superwomen," "Sapphire's Mamas," "Mean and Evil Bitches" etc. were the numerous appellations attached to the Black Mothers. Besides various other struggles, black women have to constantly fight such stereotyping also.

According to bell hooks, this "matriarch myth" is made possible only through sexist ideology. She argues that this myth is created to perpetuate patriarchy by warning men of the impending female dominance. This myth is so powerful as to convince black men that black women's liberation was inimical to the struggle for the liberation of black people as a whole (1981, 181).

In this context the debate whether the black society in America is patriarchal or not becomes very relevant. The unit that needs to be examined in this regard is the black family. Sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier believed the black family is matriarchal. In his The Negro Family in the United States, Frazier says:

As a rule, the Negro woman as wife or mother was the mistress of her cabin, and, save for the interference of master or overseer, her wishes in regard to mating and family matters were paramount. Neither economic necessity nor tradition had instilled in her the spirit of subordination to masculine authority. Emancipation only tended to confirm the spirit of self-sufficiency which slavery had taught. (1966, 102)

Frazier went to the extent of suggesting that matriarchy was responsible for the disorganisation and degeneracy of the black family. Unwittingly, Frazier contributed to racist sociology by asking questions like "What authority was there to take the place of the master's in regulating sex relations and maintaining the permanency of marital ties? Where could the Negro father look for a sanction of his authority in family relations which had scarcely existed in the past" (1966, 73)? As Alladi Uma rightly points out, these sociologists "perceive matriarchy as a negative condition and find the family disorganised..." (1989, 12).

However, scholars like Herbert G. Gutman strongly differed with Frazier and his school calling their emphasis "misdirected" (1976, 8). Gutman supplies required empirical information on the length of slave marriages registered in Nelson and Rockbridge counties in the year 1866 only to disprove the notion that "double-headed households had existed mostly among "elite" slaves" (1976, 13). Gutman calls it a misconception that "'matrifocal' household prevailed among the mass of illiterate plantation field hands and laborers" (1976, 13). Gutman also disapproves the notion that respect for the two parent household was either an imitation of the White marriage models or a result of "encouragement offered to 'favored' slaves by owners...." (1976, 13).

I perceive the black family as patriarchal and take Aliadi Uma's words to reinforce my view:

While the woman, out of economic necessity, goes to work, this economic independence, this illusory power, in a way enhances rejection by her man. Even when she does not take advantage of this independence, her husband does not appreciate her.... Although he may not be the absolute provider, he is still the dominant force and authority in the house. (1989, 13)

Slavery might have made the black woman strong, resilient and to an extent independent but not to the extent of assuming a recognizably dominant social status. In the words of Kay Lindsey, "the dominion of the kitchen and the welfare apartment

are hardly powerful vantage points" (qtd. in Uma 1989, 13). However, due to the constraints of my exercise, I refrain from harping on this debate and reiterate my perception of the black family as by and large patriarchal.

A brief historical outline of Black Motherhood is essential for my exercise because the poetry I am going to deal with has its roots firmly entrenched in history. However, treating Black Mother only historically and as a biological parent would be a narrow perspective. The concept of Black Motherhood is multifaceted and calls for different perspectives.

Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis in Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives clearly state that in spite of certain commonalities among all mothers, irrespective of race or class, Motherhood cannot be reduced to a biological function (1981, 83). This is more so in the case of Black Motherhood.

The uniqueness of the black female community lies in the fact that Motherhood goes beyond biological parentage and becomes a function that is performed by all black women. In the absence of the biological mothers other relatives such as sisters, aunts, cousins, grandmothers, etc., perform the role of the mother. Johnetta B. Cole says that "in America...racism and poverty frequently bring about situations in which many Black children will have surrogate mothers.... This means that many young African-American girls have multiple models of 'mother'" (Preface 1991, xv). In the words of Beverly Guy-Sheftall:

A nurturing female community of grandmothers, aunts and friends often encircles their 'daughters' in order to ensure some

familiarity in their journey into a world characterized by uncertainty and even hostility. (1991, 62)

All those women who perform Motherhood without being the biological mothers are called the "significant others" (1981, 81) by Joseph and Lewis. This phenomenon plays a major role in the black family network. Besides strengthening the family and consequently the whole community, it also gives the children a sense of belonging.

The historical reasons for the emergence of these "significant others" are interesting. Black women have always performed a dual role--the bread-earners and psycho-social supporters of their families. If much of the physical energy was expended in work, their psychological energy was spent in providing psychological and emotional support to the members of their families against social hostilities. Besides these onerous tasks, black women received very little help from black men in domestic work such as taking care of the children. Obviously black women could not express maternal affection towards their children satisfactorily. (Lack of demonstrative affection is one major stumbling block in black mother-daughter relations according to Joseph and Lewis.) Usually young children were left to the care of older family members or peers. When the children were left with older people, the generational gap between them gave rise to autonomy and a sense of responsibility among them. They sought help and guidance from their own age-mates, rather than adults. Black women from a very young age, to remember Johnetta B. Cole again, had different models of a mother. Joseph and Lewis point out that:

Black women play integral roles in the family and frequently it is immaterial whether they are biological mothers, sisters or members of the extended family.

(1981, 76)

Black women, according to them, "mother" their sisters, nephews or cousins as well as their own children. Because of these "significant others" Motherhood in the black community transcends the realm of the biological parent and becomes a familial and communal function. Both social and economic factors influencing the Black family had given rise to the "significant others." Elsa Barkley Brown's personal account in her essay "Mothers of Mind" is a fine example in this regard. One of Brown's aunts is quoted by her as saying:

[y]our mother is my sister, my daughter, my mother, my cousin and to you I have been and always will be your aunt, your mother, your grandmother, your sister, your children will have an aunt, a grandmother, a great-grandmother, a mother, a sister, a cousin.

(1991, 86-87)

Black women play all these roles because they are socialized into becoming self-reliant at a very young age. By constantly observing their mothers, and the hardships they have gone through, black women become very supportive of their mothers. Thus the qualities of Black Motherhood pass from one generation to the next one. In the words of Joseph and Lewis: "It is the

mother who constructs the sturdy black bridges for daughters ...to cross over on" (1981, 79). This brings us to another major facet of Black Motherhood viz., Black Mother as the preserver and transmitter of African-American culture. In the words of Sandra Y. Govan:

Black women... sought not only to preserve history but also laboured to provide both positive products and significant or sensitive images in order to 'rally the race' either individually or collectively, concrete affirmations of an identifiably Afro-American culture. (1988, 1)

✓ Although Govan is talking about the written word, I find this statement ample enough to include unwritten forms of cultural conservation also. Govan, more or less, echoes Alice Walker's idea of preserving and carrying black culture put forth in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. For Walker the mothers and grandmothers of African-American community were "not Saints but Artists;" creators "who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality--which is the basis of Art" (1983, 233).

From growing a garden of flowers to making a quilt out of "worthless rags" (Walker 1983, 239) black women displayed unparalleled creative zeal, and as mothers, passed it on to their daughters:

[O]ur mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they

themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.

(1983, 240)

walker's idea of Black mother as the proof of living black culture, heritage and creativity is a very useful insight for my exercise because as I have already said, I intend to emphasise Black Motherhood as a cultural continuum across generations. Black Mother is a metaphor for the assertion of a distinct African-American culture.

Motherhood in black community is treated as sacred. The honour of the Mother must not be tainted. Fighting for one's mother's honour is also a symbol of machismo. Even in a game like Dozens,³ an abusive reference to mother would lead to a combat. However, this celebration of Motherhood should not be construed as meaning that Black Mother's life is a bed of roses. The very celebration makes the role demanding. And the Black Mother cannot afford to be imperfect because she is the ideal. Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis bring out this contradiction well:

The Black Mother... is also a woman, and herein lies the great contradiction. The 'honoured' mother is the same second class citizen who is often regarded and treated as an object to be used, bruised and abused for years and who is considered to be used up after thirty, forty, and forty-five years. The societal attitude toward Mother is one of both idealization and degradation. The mother's role in the

family is symbolic of contradictions and
contrasts. (1981, 92)

Mother, in the black community, seems to embody love, nurture and accommodation as well as the power to withhold them; she can create conflict and also resolve it.

In African-American literary tradition, the image of the Black Mother is the most pervasive of the images of women. However, as Andrea Benton Rushing points out, "images of black women in Afro-American poetry are both varied and narrow" (1978, 74). This applies to the portrayal of the Black Mother also:

Almost all the images of mother revolve
around her strength under stress ... In the
Afro-American tradition, mother is not a
cushion but the impetus and example for
perseverance in a hostile world. (1978, 75)

The usual image of the Black Mother that Rushing talks about is best expressed in Dunbar who says:

The women of a race be its pride;
We glory in the strength our mothers had;
We glory that this strength was not denied
To labour bravely, nobly and be glad.

(qtd. in Rushing 1978, 74)

Idealization of an individual denies the possibility of understanding that individual in all his/her entirety and complexity. That is what had happened to the Black Mother. She is viewed from stock-perspectives like an "inspirer" and "strength-giver" and not as a human being with her own

imperfections. This however does not mean that the idealized is a false construct. What is important is that there is more to be understood about the Black Mother than as an idealized image.

In this thesis I shall focus on all the facets of Black Motherhood I have discussed, so far. Early poets like Frances Harper, Helene Johnson, John Leslie Holloway, and Paul Laurence Dunbar and recent poets like [~]Sonia Sanchez, Don Lee and Gwendolyn Brooks dealt with the image of the Black Mother. I would, however, attempt to analyse the portrayal of the Black Mother in the poetry of Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni. Both Hughes and Johnson wrote during the Harlem Renaissance (Hughes continued to write even after the Renaissance) and Baraka and Giovanni wrote during the thundering 60's of the Black Power Movement.

Hughes deals with the Black Mother and Motherhood quite often in his poetry and he lays great emphasis on the importance of the Black Mother in the building of the black community. From his first volume The Weary Blues to his last book of verse The Panther and the Lash, we find a number of poems dealing with Black Motherhood.

Georgia Douglas Johnson, a contemporary of Hughes and a connoisseur of poetry during her time was a poet herself. She did not receive the kind of attention she deserved from critics and is rarely included in Black American poetry anthologies. I shall be dealing with The Heart of a Woman, Bronze and An Autumn Love Cycle. My focus will be on Bronze because it deals separately with Black Motherhood in a section titled "Motherhood."

Amiri Baraka, formerly LeRoi Jones, is widely considered

the Father of Modern African-American poetry. Although the number of poems by him about the Black Mother is comparatively small, those poems are reflective of his attitude towards the role of women/mothers in African-American community. I shall examine his poetry from Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note to Hard Facts. I find it interesting to study his poetry along with that of his brilliant contemporary Nikki Giovanni. I shall deal with all her major works like Black Feeling Black Talk, Black Judgement, My House and Ego-Tripping. Here again, my focus will be on My House for it spells out Giovanni's philosophy of art and life.

The aim of this thesis is not to glorify the Black Mother and to make a Superwoman out of her. It is, rather, an attempt at observing her in all entirety through the kaleidoscope of poetry. I must make it clear that my intention in studying these poets comparatively is not only to understand their poetry better but also to examine my own ability to take a stand with regard to the issues I highlight. I am aware of the fact that this will be a journey through a significant phase of human and literary history; the history of the everlasting battle between the murderously insane aspects of human mind like oppression and the explosive creativity of the same human mind that perpetually seeks to destroy that insanity. In order to be just, one should be critical. I shall try my best to be critical and just.

Notes

1. Refer to Alice Walker's essay in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens by the same title. 241.
2. Rosa Parks refused to vacate the seat meant for whites in a bus in 1955. This act sparked off the Civil Rights Movement.
3. In his acclaimed masterpiece The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. DuBois explains what he perceives as a peculiar characteristic of black people in America:

... the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

(1961, 16-17)

4. In the words of bell hooks:

The mammy image was portrayed with affection by whites because it epitomized the ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal black womanhood--complete submission to the will of whites.... They saw her as the embodiment of woman as passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but who loved them.... Contemporary television shows continue to present black mammy figures as prototypes of acceptable black womanhood.

(1981, 84-85)

5. Dozens is a game played in African-American community. It tests one's cool and control. The limit is twelve words in any abusive manner one wants, but thirteen is beyond the limit. Usually the boiling thirteenth point is a derogatory reference to mother. See Joseph and Lewis (1981, 91-92).

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Chapter 2

**"... storm the sullen fortress..."-- Black Mother
as the Leader and the Martyr in the Poetry of
Langston Hughes and Georgia Douglas Johnson**

But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.

(Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son," Selected Poems
of Langston Hughes, 1990, page 187, lines 8-14)

Some day
I shall be glad that it was mine to be
A dark fore-runner of a race burgeoning;
I then shall know
The secret of life's Calvary,
And bless the thorns
That wound me!

(Georgia Douglas Johnson, "Perspective," Bronze:
A Book of Verse, 1922, 61.)

Studying the poetry of Langston Hughes and Georgia Douglas Johnson together is as interesting an exercise as it is exciting. Firstly, because they were contemporaries, i.e., both

their careers as poets began around the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. In fact much before Hughes's first volume of poems The Weary Blues appeared in 1926, Johnson had brought out two of her major collections of poems called The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems and Bronze in 1918 and 1922 respectively. All of Johnson's poetry was published between 1918 and 1930 whereas Hughes' prolific writing continued till his death in 1967. The second reason is that both Hughes and Johnson deal with Black Motherhood quite specifically. Although Johnson is not as prolific and comprehensive as Hughes, her brilliant 1922 collection Bronze has a separate section titled "Motherhood" in which she celebrates the self-effacing heroism of the Black Mother. In her other collections like The Heart of a Woman and An Autumn Love Cycle also the concept of Motherhood surfaces occasionally though not in explicit terms. [I have not discussed Johnson's other volume of poetry, Share My World: A Book of Poems, owing to its non-availability.]

In comparison to Georgia Douglas Johnson, Langston Hughes stands as a giant figure. My understanding, or rather attempts at understanding Hughes as a man and a poet can be best summarised in his own words at the end of his extraordinary autobiography called The Big Sea:

Literature is a big sea full of many fish.
I let down my nets and pulled. I'm still
pulling. (1963, 335)

As a writer Langston Hughes is an ocean, more in terms of quality than quantity. Hughes' oeuvre includes poetry, fiction, drama, literary criticism, journalistic writings, and

autobiography. There is virtually no genre that he didn't attempt and rarely did he fail in achieving the desired effect. However, as a poet Langston Hughes was not always praised. In the case of Georgia Douglas Johnson it was pure neglect. She was branded as a minor poet and was never paid serious critical attention. Hughes, on the other hand, received both bouquets and brickbats. His immense popularity as a poet made critics like Allison Davis call his poetry "vulgar," "sordid," and "sensational" (qtd. in Jemie 1976, 26-27). But Langston Hughes never gave in. John Unterecker in his Foreword to Onwuchekwa Jemie's Langston Hughes succinctly puts Hughes' attitude as a poet:

In a time when it was fashionable to be difficult, Hughes... risked to be simple.

(1979, ix)

In spite of being initially branded as a mere "popular" writer, Hughes' brilliant use of folk and musical forms like Blues, Jazz and Spirituals made critics recognize him as a great poet at a later stage. He was a perfect blend of amazing simplicity and disturbing profundity.

Georgia Douglas Johnson's relegation to the minor poets' category is best summarised by J. Saunders Redding when he says in a rather sarcastic tone that she was overshadowed by the "masculine literature of the New Negro" (qtd. in Fletcher 1987, 153). However, phrases like "exquisite utterance," "lyric sensibility," "passionate and plaintive" etc are attributed to her poetry now. Winona Fletcher, one of the few who have paid Johnson some serious attention, calls Johnson unique and traces

that uniqueness "in her essence and development as a black poet whose writing reveals an awareness of the socio-cultural and racial conditions of her life that affected her creativity" (Fletcher 1987, 153-154). In my view, her earlier poetry in The Heart of a Woman does not reflect this 'awareness' but her 1922 collection Bronze is explicitly racial in its theme and treatment. And it is from Bronze that I wish to take the poems dealing with Black Motherhood. I shall analyse her poems from Bronze with necessary references to her other collections of poetry.

In the case of Langston Hughes, as I have already mentioned in my introductory chapter from his first volume The Weary Blues to his last The Panther and the Lash, quite a lot of poems deal with Black Motherhood. And every later collection of his poems repeats some poems from the previous collection(s). With the intention of avoiding confusion about chronology and of reinforcing my emphasis on the theme of Motherhood, I have decided to lay relatively more emphasis on the range and depth of Langston Hughes's understanding of Black Motherhood than on the mere development of his poetic consciousness chronologically. My approach to the poetry of Georgia Douglas Johnson will also be the same because of which I have chosen to focus on Bronze, which was her second book.

As I have already pointed out earlier, Langston Hughes' understanding of Black Motherhood is sensitive and subtle. For me the best example of his perception of Black Motherhood can be found in the poem "The Negro Mother." The beginning suggests in a contemplative manner, the arrival of the Black Mother:

Children, I come back today
 To tell you a story of the long dark way
 ✓ That I had to climb, that I had to know
 In order that the race might live and grow

(1990, 288, 1-4)

In these lines Hughes captures the history of Black Motherhood, the role of the mother as a living example and carrier of African-American history.

The Black Mother in this poem is a story-teller. The "coming back" is an interesting usage. Where does she come back from and where does she go? Obviously the movement is from the past, in an abstract sense, to the present, also in an abstract sense. What I mean by this "abstract sense" is that no specific time, date or period is mentioned by Hughes. The Black Mother moves from generation to generation like a timeless figure. In fact, in this poem the Black Mother is more like a voice, a voice of the race, the voice of history:

I am the child they stole from the sand
 Three hundred years ago in Africa's land
 I am the dark girl who crossed the wide sea
 Carrying in my body the seed of the free.

(1990, 288, 7-10)

✓ Hughes not only feminizes history but also foregrounds two other important aspects. First, he is aware of the African-American poetic tradition pioneered by Phillis Wheatley. The first two lines of the above passage echo Wheatley's lament about being snatched away from "Afric's fancy'd happy seat:"

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
was snatched from Afric's fancy'd happy seat.

(1984, 74, 24-25)

And second, he talks about Motherhood at its most elevated state-- "carrying... the seed of the free." It captures the loss of "freedom," which the black people had experienced in Africa and which they had lost after their arrival in America. But the hope, the dream is not lost. And it is the Mother who bears, carries and nurtures this dream. In this sense, for Hughes, the Black Mother definitely becomes more than a mere biological parent or even a race-protector. She becomes a symbol, a metaphor for the whole race's survival amidst sustained denigration:

Sometimes, the road was not with Sun,
But I had to keep on till my work was done.
I had to keep on! No stopping for me.

(1990, 288, 27-29; emphasis added)

The Black Mother not only embodies the race but instills the spirit of racial pride and rebellion against oppression:

Remember how the strong in struggle and strife
Still bar you the way, and deny you life
But march ever forward, breaking down bars.

(1990, 288, 45-47; emphasis added)

Physical violence is not an alien concept to the Black Mother. In these lines, the Black Mother uses a riot-like image. It brings to mind a colossal force called black people who are hell-bent on destroying the barriers that trammel their way to

freedom. These lines express the determination, the courage and the stubbornness of a woman who teaches her children the importance of being all this in a hostile environment. Baxter R. Miller, in his insightful The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes makes a subtle observation:

... While we do not know the strength of the bars that represent the limitations in the third part, the tone suggests that these surpass neither the will of the mother nor the potential strength of the children whom she inspires. (1989, 39)

She is not just a voice or an abstract representation of history and black race but a palpable physical entity with flesh and blood. She refers to her physicality and her own existential agony as an oppressed individual while encouraging rebellion.

Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair.
 Remember my years, heavy with sorrow--
 And make of those years a torch for tomorrow
 Lift high my banner out of the dust.

(1990, 288, 36-41; emphasis added)

Miller quite convincingly argues that the "torch" which the Mother hands over to her progeny is equivalent to "teaching them the Secret of Black Art; the conversion of suffering into personal and social good. In lighting her way, the torch signals moral progression" (1989, 40). Here the Black Mother embodies resilience and inner-strength, which she passes on to the succeeding generations.

In this poem we see what Calvin Hernton characterizes as the "interplay" between "the biological birthing and rearing of the black race and the abiding spirituality of the grandmother [mother] as nourisher of the dream, the hopes and aspirations of black people" (1987, 95).

Hernton also argues that in the writing of Hughes there is a "Mother who is Grand" (1987, 96). This Grandmother, as the mother in "The Negro Mother" is a historical personage. It is interesting to hear the "Negro Mother" call the white man a "brother:"

For I will be with you till no white brother
Dares keep down the children of Negro Mother.

(1990, 288, 51-52; emphasis added)

This Mother-figure who is a combination of humanity and divinity is called Earth Madonna by Hernton. But according to him there is a flaw in her, which is her christian love. The christian doctrine of loving even the enemy "obstructs its advocates in being more than 'survival leaders'" (1987, 97-98).

Here, I disagree with Hernton. Even if the poem is written in the form of a monologue of a Black Mother, the convictions of the poet do not escape the reader's attention. We should not forget the fact that Hughes is the poet who insisted that he too would "sing America" (1990, 275, 1). Hughes believed in the dream of achieving American democratic ideals and nurtured this dream all his life in spite of his occasional bouts of disillusionment. In his "I too" he says, "I am the darker brother" (1990, 275, 2). Brotherhood between whites and blacks has never been a far-fetched idea for Hughes. In fact he desired

it. I contend that the last lines of "The Negro Mother" mark the sudden upsurge of Hughes' poetic and ideological persona. If there has to be a rebellion, let it be for the equality of the races and not for one's superiority over the other. I would rather attribute the last lines of the poem to Hughes than to the human "flaw" of "The Negro Mother."

"The Negro Mother" is not only a poem about the "Grand Mother" but also, a Grand poem, because it encompasses black history from slavery to the 20th century in a splendidly poetic fashion. Not only that, it encapsulates the history of the black woman as a Mother as a preserver of her race's identity. To quote Miller again:

The mother's general delineation as woman
 early on prepares for the particular
 depiction of her as the "Negro Mother" in
 the second and third parts. Because, in the
 second part, the woman is the seed of an
 emerging free race, she becomes one with
 her children, who are young and free.

(1989, 40)

Motherhood in the poetry of Hughes goes much beyond biological parentage and cultural preservation. Motherhood for him assumes many forms. In his poem "Africa," Motherhood becomes a geographical entity as well as an ideological concept. In the words of Onwuchekwa Jemie, Langston Hughes's greatness lies, besides in his economy, lucidity, evocativeness of imagery and mellifluity, in his "deep-rooted Afro-American sensibility" (1976, 30). "Africa" talks about the awakening of this

sensibility:

Sleepy giant,
 you've been resting awhile.
 Now I see the thunder
 And the lightning
 In your smile.
 Now I see
 The storm clouds
 In your waking eyes:
 The thunder,
 The wonder
 And the young
 Surprise.

 Your every step reveals
 The new stride
 In your thighs. (1990, 284)

The last three lines can be interpreted as a prophecy about the dawning of African identity in the consciousness of African-American people. It is the identification of oneself with his/her Motherland, Africa, that gives birth to the African-American sensibility. Words like "thunder," "lightning" and "wonder" suggest rebellion and sudden excitement. And the deliberate reference to "thighs" symbolizes the "birthing" Mother, because "every new step" shows that the origin of that "new stride" is derived from the strength of that Mother. Hughes' poem is deceptively simple, working at different levels and offering varying perspectives. At one level, it is a comment on the grandmother of Africa as a land of cultural opulence,

which at another level is obviously telling White America where his roots are, and, of course, it is a mammoth celebration of Africa as the Mother who gives birth to a sensibility that Hughes wants his people to identify themselves with and be proud of.

"Mother to Son," another major poem, is not very much different from "The Negro Mother" in terms of theme and content. But the tone varies from that of the latter. Here the mother is more "physical" in her presence and more vociferous:

Well son, I'll tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
 It's had tacks in it,
 And splinters,
 And boards torn up,
 And places with no carpet on the floor--
 Bare. (1990, 187, 1-7)

Here the Mother is talking about the sheer physical exhaustion and the psychological strength needed to overcome that exhaustion:

But all the time
 I've been a-climbin'on.. (1990, 187, 8-9)

These lines show her determination and strength. This Mother is an inspirer and an instiller of courage and wisdom. But she is more than a mere inspirer and "survival leader." She is talking about not just surviving against odds, but also "climbing" up against odds. The upward mobility does not suggest mobility towards material ambitions, which is inherent to the

logic of success in a capitalist society like America, but the ideal of equality. In fact "she asserts the paradox of the American myth makers, who propose that all Americans are equal," and "moves from a worldly vision to a religious one, for hers is less a progression of the body than an evolution of the soul" (Miller 1989, 36). In a way the Black Mother brainwashes her son about the need for spiritual strength:

So, boy, don't you turn back,
 Don't you set down on the steps
 'cause you finds it's kinder hard.

(1990, 187, 14-16)

There is advice. There is caution but most importantly, there is optimism that is born out of one's faith in oneself:

...I'se still goin, honey,
 I'se still climbin...

(1990, 187, 18-19)

Akiba Sullivan Harper in her article titled "Langston Hughes as Cultural Conservator: Women in the Life of a 'Negro Everyman'" has a very interesting remark to make about the African-American men's dependence on the women of their race. She says:

Most African-American men can trace discipline in some loving female parental figure who not only whipped, but also worried and prayed for their souls.

(1988, 16)

The Mother in "Mother to Son" is more than a loving

parental figure. In fact she is the model, an example of the struggle against oppression. Just as she carries the African-American heritage in her heart and soul, she also carries the spirit of rebellion which she bequeaths to the subsequent generations of her race. In my view "Mother to Son" captures not just the heroism of the Black Mother but the intra-racial interaction between the Mother and her children.

I find it quite fascinating that serious advice is always, addressed to "sons" and not to "daughters!" Even Georgia Douglas Johnson talks only to her "son" as a bearer of the race's assertion and never to a daughter. It is ironical that a woman, who bears the race, both men and women, should address only one section of her progeny instead of the whole race as one to fight for any cause.'

One wonders if in spite of being "distinctly feministic" (Hernton 1987, 118) and sensitive, Langston Hughes fails to overcome the idea of male superiority. Acts of assertion, rebellion and force are automatically considered male realms and men are called upon to take over the responsibility. The role of women is confined to domestic responsibilities of which rearing the children (and sons especially) into assertive individuals is one.

However, Hughes is vociferously supported by Onwuchekwa Jemie in not so unconvincing a manner:

To despair is... to wither and die. And as one conscious of her destiny as bearer of "The seed of the Free," one therefore on whom the future depended, the Black Mother chose to keep climbing. This is her

achievement that she survived to bear and
nourish new generations, a staggering
achievement under the circumstances.

(1976, 100)

"Mama and Daughter," my next choice, makes more sense when studied along with "Mother to Son." What strikes me in the two poems at the outset is the difference between the titles. In the former title the relationship is at an equal level--Mama and Daughter; in the latter poem the relationship shows hierarchy, the act of passing-on, and a sense of authority--Mother to Son. It is also important to take note of the subtle difference between the choice of words. In the case of the son, it is "Mother" whereas in the case of the daughter, it is "Mama." The conversation between the "Mother" and the "Son" is more formal and serious in nature whereas the dialogue between the Mama and the Daughter is light-hearted.

"Mama and Daughter," is an informal conversation-poem. The dialogue-technique is ubiquitous in Hughes' poetry. He exhibits extraordinary spontaneity, simplicity and depth while writing conversational poem. In this particular poem this technique emphasizes the peculiar relationships between the mother and the daughter. Here the mother and her daughter discuss men:

Who is your sugar, honey?

Turn around--I'll brush behind.

He is that young man, mama

I can't get off my mind. (1990, 132, 5-8)

At this juncture, the mother decides to educate her daughter

about men:

Daughter, once upon a time
 Let me brush the hem--
 Your father, yes, he was the one!
 I felt like that about him.
 But it was long time ago
 He up and went away. (1990, 132, 9-14)

This poem talks about two very important aspects of black culture--the unique relationship between the Black Mother and the daughter and the attitude of black women towards black men. This poem is a fine example of Hughes' understanding of the intra-racial issues of his community.

The longstanding economic independence of black women has made them wary of black men. In the survey conducted by Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis, it is found out that most of the Black Mothers advise their daughters to be economically independent. Besides this economic independence, Black Mothers also want their daughters to be very careful in their choice of partners of the opposite sex. For example one young woman is reported to have said:

They're [Men are] dogs. Always in heat,
 move from one woman to another, without a
 thought in their minds. (1981, 113)

Majority of Black Mothers see men as abusive and unreliable and the same message is passed on to their daughters. The above statement by the young girl is representative of the skepticism and the vehement distrust that black women exercise toward black

men. According to Joseph and Lewis all those Black Mothers who see men as unreliable and abusive "also assume and accept as a [sic] given that their daughters will marry these men" (1981, 112; emphasis added).

"Mama and Daughter" captures this interesting contradiction. On the one hand, the mother is trying to convince her daughter about the great probability of the latter's choice being wrong. On the other, she is subconsciously aware of the possibility that her daughter might not heed her advice. So it is in a curious mixture of concern out of love and anger from experience and helplessness. She says about her own former lover:

I hope that wild son-of-a-gun
Rots in hell today! (1990, 132, 15-16)

For the Mother the past is not dead yet. Her image of her lover, who was the father of her daughter, is still young. The daughter points out, "Mama, dad couldn't be still young" (1990, 132, 17). The conversation turns from the daughter's man to the Mother's. The daughter is a combination of ticklishness and sarcasm. She succeeds in causing the required digression, and the mother is no longer thinking about the daughter and her affair. She slips into her own past:

He was young yesterday
He was young when he
Turn around!
So I can brush your back, I say!

(1990, 132, 18-21)

There is an abrupt break in the second line of the above stanza. The mother is about to say something personal and probably about her own sexual life. But she checks herself. What she says after checking herself is more important. The last two lines carry a lively dramatic effect. But they also seem to have a greater symbolic importance. It could be the last and desperate attempt by the mother to convince her daughter to "turn around" and look at what had happened to her own mother. "Brushing" her "back" may also suggest the mother's attempt to use violence if need be to correct the daughter. This is another special characteristic of the Black Mother. Daughters in black community have expressed "fear" as well as "respect" for their mothers (Joseph and Lewis 1981, 98). The respect was largely due to the hardships faced by the mothers to keep the family and community intact. The fear was caused by the toughness and disciplinarian tendency of the mother. The Black Mothers "performed the functions of providing the socio-emotional support; they kept the family together in a relatively contended fashion, and at the same time 'cracked the whip'" (Joseph and Lewis 1981, 101).

Black daughters are socialized into their sexuality, and mothers contribute greatly to this socialization. Whether it is the puritanical upbringing where sex is considered "dirty" and "sinful" or liberal upbringing where sex and expression of sexuality are not taboos, Mother is the key figure. In "Mama and Daughter," Hughes portrays a complex Mother. She is torn between puritanical and liberal attitudes. Her abrupt ending of the reference to her own sexual relationship with a man years ago shows puritanical attitude, whereas a not-so coercive attitude

towards her daughter's affair displays certain amount of liberality. The Mother is not a real strict disciplinarian. She argues in the hope of convincing but with the awareness that she might fail to do so.

She is not assertive but she also has the wisdom, gleaned from the hard knocks of experience. Moreover, unlike in a poem like "The Negro Mother," in this poem the Mother is earthy. She is a biological parent who is constructed and influenced by social reality consisting of sexual, social and racial hardships.

The woman's rebellion in "S-sss-ss-sh," probably reflecting Hughes' own sense of rebellion, is about a young unmarried woman who "chooses" to become a mother to the shock of the whole community and particularly her own mother. It is worthwhile remembering that black women, during the slavery days, often became mothers in spite of their choice. Motherhood was mostly an inevitability in the lives of many a slave woman despite the fact that they have loved their offsprings. In a way, in this poem, Hughes is marking the arrival of a New Black Woman, a woman who makes her own choices irrespective of what the community or the society thinks of it. The beginning of the poem has the stamp of Hughes' gleeful humour:

Her great adventure ended
 As great adventures should
 In life being created
 Anew--and good.

(1990, 134, 1-4; emphasis added)

In the very use of the word "adventure" Hughes captures the

confrontation between the established societal norms and a woman's right to Motherhood. In a capitalist, patriarchal and racist society which demands that the role of a good mother be played by a woman, having a child by her volition is a revolutionary act. And this is more true in the case of the black woman. It is an "adventure." Hughes not only celebrates this adventure but admires the "coolness" with which the young mother faces the whole situation. And his justification of the young mother's decision to have the child is as facetious as it is commonsensical:

Nature has a way
Of not caring much
About marriage
Licences and such. (1990, 134, 8-11)

In a way, Hughes is concluding that it is a woman's natural right to choose Motherhood:

But the neighbor
And her mother
Cared very much! (1990, 134, 12-14)

The society in which the black woman lives constantly monitors her behaviour and it is always the woman's battle against it for her own rights.

The apparent fun tone of the poem is subverted in the last two lines:

But the mother and child
Thought it fun. (1990, 134, 20-21)

Hughes' intelligence lies in using the word "fun" only to imply that it is not really fun after all. And it is not just the mother that is happy but the child also. Hughes is marking the arrival of a mother who is giving birth to a generation that rejects oppressive puritanical norms. Hughes contrasts the birth of the baby with the shock of the community, thus emphasizing the importance of such an event:

The baby came one morning,
Almost with the sun.

The neighbors
And its grandma
Were outdone!

(1990, 134, 15-19; emphasis added)

The constant recurrence of the word 'neighbors' along with the reference to the mother of the young woman explains how, in the words of bell hooks, the American society makes women in opposition "a cultural necessity" (1981, 117) in order to perpetuate patriarchy. It also explains how, black women (represented by the young woman's grandmother) accepted the American societal norms and expressed shock at anyone going against them.

This poem brings to mind Alice Walker's idea of Motherhood. Walker talks about "accountability." In her article "One child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)," Walker, besides arguing that "Motherhood" is an enriching experience, instead of a stifling one, opines that a Mother is accountable to her children and to the succeeding generations. Speaking on the Muriel Ruskeyer Day at Sarah Lawrence college in

1979, Walker says:

For me, there has been conflict, struggle, occasional defeat--not only in affirming the life of my own child (children) at all costs, but also in seeing in that affirmation a fond acceptance and confirmation of myself in a world that would deny me the untrampled blossoming of my own existence. (1983, 372)

Walker goes on to add, what I consider in the context of Hughes' poem, a very significant statement, that she has found this to be "Political in the deepest sense" (1983, 372). It is a political act because of the simple reason that it opposes the established oppressive norms of a male-dominated society. I apply the same sense in which she uses the word 'political' to "S-sss-ss-h!" where the young mother's decision to have the baby is a political act, an act symbolizing positive assertion and revolutionary attitude, under adverse circumstances. In the same talk/essay Walker also talks about two kinds of creativity that a woman is capable of--physical and mental. According to Walker, a woman is capable of two Motherhoods--of her progeny and of the collective cultural expression of the African-American people. She considers herself a woman with "two wombs"--her mind and her physical womb (1983, 378). And for her the act of giving birth is as "political" as it is "miraculous" (1983, 377). The woman in Hughes' poem performs both the miracle and the political act. And Hughes celebrates both. Walker says: "'Progress' affects few" and "only revolution can affect many" (1983, 381). This

young woman represents a revolution, and she cannot be "S-sss-ss-h"ed.

"Motherhood" as a metaphor, as a biological responsibility, as a concept embodying ideology and/or a revolutionary choice pervade Hughes' poetry but there are other shades also which he has portrayed. One such shade can be seen in "Aunt Sue's Stories."

At the outset "Aunt Sue's Stories" is a representative of the history of black people:

Black slaves

Working in the hot sun,

And black slaves

Walking in the dewy night. (1990, 6, 6-9)

Although similar to "The Negro Mother" in narrating a story, this poem has two major facets which are interlinked. One, the importance of orality in black culture and heritage and two, the role played by the Aunt as participant in that oral tradition. In the light of my concern with Motherhood, I shall deal with the latter part with a brief explanation of the former.

Arna Bontemps in his introduction to The Book of Negro Folklore which he has co-edited with Langston Hughes, observes that "the slaves brought with them to the New World their ancient habit of story-telling as pastime..." (1958, viii). The creativity of the African-American writers has its roots in the African oral tradition. And it is by the use of this orality that most mothers in the black community could preserve and pass on their culture to the subsequent generations.

In the act of narrating the "real stories" Aunt Sue is

performing another function--she is playing the role of a mother. In another sense, Aunt Sue is a perfect example of the "significant others" whom I discussed in the opening chapter. She is the "Mother-figure."

The fascinating aspect about Aunt Sue is that she is different from the mother in "Mother to Son" or "The Negro Mother" in terms of her function. No doubt she is "mothering" the child, despite not being the biological parent:

Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories. (1990, 6, 4-5)

Hughes marks the performance of the functions of a mother by a "significant other" using words like "cuddling." But unlike the mothers in "Mother to Son" or "The Negro Mother" Aunt Sue is the mother who is a "creative artist," and her creativity has its roots in reality and history:

And the dark faced child, listening
Knows that Aunt Sue's stories are real stories.
He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
Out of any book at all,
But that they came
Right out of her own life

(1990, 6, 17-22; emphasis added)

Interestingly, the poem is not about Aunt Sue's life. Her life is not really her life, but the history of black people in the U.S.A. It is about the "sorrow songs" of the slaves that "mingle themselves softly...in the dark shadows that cross and recross" (1990, 6, 12-15) her stories. Aunt Sue narrativizes black

history as her own life. Thus through her stories Aunt Sue "writes" history on the minds of the children. Aunt Sue "records." She not only performs Motherhood at a physical level but also conserves and handsover history to her successors. In that sense, Aunt Sue, besides being a creative narrator of history, is also a symbol of authenticity. She reconstructs the reality imaginatively. To quote R. Baxter Miller again, Aunt Sue "is more human than almost any other female figure inscribed by a Black male writer in either Hughes' time or our own" (1989, 46). Hughes was a poet who "dreamt" and at the same time questioned the procrastination of its realisation: "What happens to a dream deferred?" (1990, 268, 1).

In a brilliant poem titled "Graduation" he talks about dream and disillusionment and this time it is the Mother who dreams and is disillusioned. In a way "Graduation" is an anti-climax to the painful and excruciating struggle that the Black Mother took part in for her race. The revolutionary zeal of "The Negro Mother" and the resilience and courage of the mother in "Mother to Son" are countered here. "Graduation" talks about the bitter and agonising reality that the black people face in the American society.

This is a poem about a Mother and her daughter. The mother works in a "white" kitchen and the daughter has just graduated. The daughter's educational qualification promises her a job:

"DIPLOMA in its new frame

Mary Lulu Jackson

Eating chicken

Tells her mama she is a typist"

(1990, 182, 10-13)

In a male-dominated, racist society Black Women always have to struggle for good education and a job. Black Mothers are aware of this fact more than anyone else. In the words of Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis:

....Black mother knows the strains and anxieties of trying to climb the social ladder with its ersatz rungs. (1981, 85)

In this poem the Mother is happy because her educated daughter is going to be away

... from basic oven
Cookstoves
And iceberg's kitchen.

(1990, 182, 17-19)

The Mother's happiness is expressed in spiritual and religious terms: "... praise Jesus!" (1990, 182, 20). This ecstasy is quite in contrast with the singing Mother in Hughes' other poem titled "Spirituals," where he says:

Sing, O Lord Jesus!
Song in a strong thing.
I heard my mother singing
When life hurt her. (1990, 28, 4-7)

In this poem Hughes depicts how the Black Mother derives strength from singing the spirituals just as

The branches rise
From the firm roots of trees.
The mountains rise

From the solid lap of earth.

The waves rise

From the dead weight of sea.

(1990, 28, 9-14)

The Black Mother is the reservoir of strength on whom the whole Black race relies for solace: "Something strong is put my hands on" (1990, 28, 3). There is hope in "Spirituals" when the poet gives the slogan:

Sing, O black mother!

Song is a strong thing.

(1990, 28, 15-16)

The tone is the same in "Graduation" also but only to emphasize the coming disillusionment. Hughes repeats "praise Jesus" thrice for that intense dramatic and emotional effect that marks the following collapse:

Mama says, praise Jesus!

The colored race will rise!

Mama says,

Praise Jesus!

Then

Because she's tired

She sighs.

(1990, 28, 25-31; emphasis added)

The dream neither dries up "like a raisin in the sun" nor festers "like a sore"; it does not stink like "rotten meat" or taste like a "syrupy sweet"; it does not even sag "like a heavy

load" (268). It just explode(s) (1990, 268, 2-11):

The DIPLOMA bursts its frame
To scatter star-dust in their eyes.

(1990, 28, 23-24)

The dreaming Mother and daughter are left with the debris of their devastated dreams. We wonder if they can say what Hughes says in "I, Too:"

Nobody'll dare

say to me

Eat in the kitchen

(1990, 275, 11-14)

or what the Mother in "The Negro Mother" says about "no white brother" daring to oppress her children. They too are America. But they have just 'graduated' into the reality, the stinging, savage American Truth. Langston Hughes thus strives to create myths that subvert the existing stereotypical myths of white and patriarchal America about Black Mothers.

Although much of Georgia Douglas Johnson's poetry deals with the so-called universal themes like love and nature, Bronze marks the dawning of race-consciousness in her work. There are nine sections in Bronze, each dealing with the various shades of this race-consciousness. "Motherhood" is one of these. This section reveals a new facet of Johnson's ingenuity and allows us to understand her work as more than "feminine" and "human," and as poetry with deep-rooted awareness of the socio-cultural and political ambience of her times. Her poetic spirit in Bronze, is best summarised in the words of W.E.B. DuBois, who wrote the Foreword for it:

Those who know what it means to be a coloured woman in 1922--and know it not so much in fact as in feeling, apprehension, unrest and delicate yet stern thought--must read Georgia Douglas Johnson's Bronze.

(1922, 7)

Johnson's Bronze is a reflection of the impact and influence of the nascent Harlem Renaissance. She came across movements like the New Negro² and was influenced by the spirit of racial identity and cultural assertion. In such a racially, politically, and culturally charged atmosphere, Johnson envisaged a role for the black woman and especially the Black Mother.

"The Mother," her very first poem in "Motherhood" is important. The Mother in Johnson's poem is sacrificing, self-effacing and a silent sufferer for her own children:

The Mother soothes her mantled child
With incantation sad and wild [.]

(1922, 41, 1-2)

Like the Mother in Hughes, she also cannot sever her ties with history:

Her thoughts are leaping down the years,
O'er branding bars, through seething tears.

(1922, 41, 5-6)

The mother in this poem is extremely protective, "sandaling" her son's feet with her own heart from the "corroding" racism and oppression (1922, 41, 7-8).

The most important part is the last stanza where,

... she dons a smile
 His tender yearnings to beguile
 And only God will ever know
 The wordless measure of her woe.

(1922, 41, 9-12; emphasis added)

Here the Mother is wearing a "mask." The mask of happiness lest her child should be affected by her own sorrow. This is the ultimate celebration of the sacrificial nature of the Black Mother. Here the mask is not the one that Paul Laurence Dunbar talks about in his poem "We Wear the Mask." Dunbar is not protesting explicitly but asserting himself when he says:

Why should the world be otherwise
 In counting all our tears and sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 we wear the mask. (1913, 71, 6-9)

He emphatically concludes saying:

... let the world dream otherwise
 We wear the mask. (1913, 71, 14-15)

Dunbar is recommending playing the white man's game only to subvert from within, whereas Johnson is not talking about subversion at all. Her mask is for the sake of her progeny. Her smile is expected to give her progeny "hope." She is not a "survival leader" but a hope-giver. She gives hope at the cost of her own life. She erases her existence gradually or burns herself up in sorrow in order that her race might live on. This

celebration of sacrifice and self-effacement is pervasive in the poetry of Georgia Douglas Johnson. It is reflective of her perception of Motherhood.

For Johnson, Womanhood is synonymous with sharing and sacrifice. In a telling poem from The Heart of a Woman titled "Sympathy," Johnson says:

Your lightest sigh I'm echoing,
 I tremble with your pain,
 And all your tears are falling
 In my heart like bitter rain.

(1971, 4, 5-8)

Ironically, even though the poem is titled "Sympathy," there is more sacrifice in this poem. The first person in the poem defines herself in accordance with her lover. This tone of submission and fragility has, perhaps, acquired her poetry the adjectives "feminine" and "human." William Stanley Braithwaite, in his introduction to The Heart of a Woman concludes:

... all that man has to his credit would
 scarcely have been achieved except for the
devotion and love and inspiring comradeship
 of woman. (1971, vii; emphasis added)

Braithwaite confines the woman's role to "inspiring comradeship" and does not acknowledge the possibility of man "oppressing" woman in the history of his achievements. He merely glorifies the so-called devotion of woman to man and The Heart of a Woman in a way justifies this devotional role of woman whose extended form is the devoted Mother. However it remains to be seen if

Johnson's "Mother" has a greater and more important role to play in her community.

In fact, she has. The mother in Johnson's "Motherhood" from Bronze does not remain a mere "Troubled woman" but displays racial pride and courage. In the poem "Shall I say, 'My Son, You're Branded'?" this spirit surfaces. The poem starts on a typical note of despondency:

Shall I say, "My Son, You're branded in
this country's

Pageantry

By strange subtleties you're tethered,
and no forum
sets you free?"

(1922, 45, 1-4; emphasis added)

It, however, suddenly assumes a tone of piercing vociferousness.

Or shall I, with love prophetic, bid you
dauntlessly
arise,

Spurn the handicap that clogs you, taking
what the world denies[.]

(1922, 45, 9-12)

Here the mother is becoming more than an inspirer. In fact, she becomes a warrior, encouraging even violence:

Bid you storm the sullen fortress
wrought by prejudice
and wrong

with a faith that shall not falter, in
 your heart and on
 your tongue!

(1922, 45, 13-16; emphasis added)

Undoubtedly, this attitude looks uncharacteristic of Johnson, considering her previous notions of woman as a whole, especially after reading her previous volumes of poetry, The Heart of a Woman, and An Autumn Love Cycle. From wearing the mask of a happy, smiling Mother, in "The Mother" (in Bronze), to one who is fed up with merely "hoping," and encouraging her children to fight for their rights, Johnson's understanding of the Black Mother has come a long way.

But what needs to be noticed is the point that here also the mother plays only an inspirer, a devoted supporter of her "male" children. This notion of Mother being an embodiment of care, love and nurture is as deep-rooted as it is difficult to counter. Difficult because this notion in no way denigrates woman but only elevates her to the level of an "ideal," a symbol of chaste, unselfish and endless love which gradually, becomes a "duty" to be performed by the woman. Black Mother, being such a giant image and emblem, cannot afford to be imperfect. She is fettered by the community's "ideal" of Motherhood, and in her poetry Georgia Douglas Johnson does not seem to have much problem in accepting the ideal and living up to it.

The poem, "Benediction," reinforces this ideal. In this poem the Mother is no longer the energetic and vigorous inspirer, but an old woman still carrying hope and enthusiasm.

Go forth, my son,
 winged by my heart's desire!
 Great reaches, yet unknown,
 Await
 For your possession.
 I may not....
 Retrace the way with you,
 My pilgrimage is through, ... (1922, 50, 1-8)

The attitude of the Mother here stands in glaring contrast to the Mother in Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son." There the Mother has been "a-climbin' on" (1990, 187, 9). In Hughes the Mother not only "inspires" but "leads" the way. In Johnson's case it is a secondary role. Her obsession with this self-sacrifice reaches its peak in "Service," where she observes:

When we count at our gold at the end of the day,
 And have filtered the dross that has cumbered the way,
 Oh, what were the hold of our treasury then
 Save the love we have shown to the children of men?
 (1922, 87; emphasis added)

The last line exemplifies Johnson's definition of Motherhood and her acceptance of patriarchy.

However, it would only be unjust to conclude that for Johnson Motherhood means total subordination. She was aware of the dilemma of a Mother living in adverse social environment, and the courage needed for a woman to accept Motherhood in her own way. It called for a great amount of self-questioning, internal debate and sternness of conscience to conquer the dilemma whether or not to have the child. Her poem "Maternity"

brilliantly captures this dilemma:

Proud?

Perhaps--and yet

I cannot say with surety

That I am happy thus to be

Responsible for this young life's embarking.

(1922, 42, 1-5)

As I mentioned in my introductory chapter, Motherhood has always been a great challenge for African-American women. Johnson enumerates the questions a Black Mother is compelled to ask herself before giving birth to her child:

Is he [the child] not thrall to prevalent conditions?

Does not the day loom dark apace

To weave its cordon of disgrace

Around his lifed throat?

(1922, 42, 6-9)

Alain Locke, in his Foreword to An Autumn Love Cycle attributes a "tragic plognancy" to Johnson's portrayal of Motherhood. He defines Motherhood as "where the consummation of love seems also the expiation of passion, and where, between the antagonisms of the dual role of Mother and Lover, we may suspect the real dilemma of womanhood to lie" (1928, xviii-xix; emphasis added). Locke adheres to the notion that Motherhood is one of the "underlying forces of natural instinct who so fatalistically control our lives" (1928, xviii).

I see a contradiction in Alain Locke's statement. On the one hand, Locke is talking about "instinct" which is attributed to nature and on the other he is talking about "roles."

Definitely a "role" is different from an "instinctive" response. A role has various factors influencing it--social, cultural, economic and political. Johnson would not have worried about the prevalent conditions if she had believed in mere "natural instincts." Women are compelled to define Motherhood for themselves as per the prevalent conditions.

Phillipa Kafka in the introduction to her The Great White Way reasons:

... women were required by their men folk to be responsible for all spousal, domestic, child-bearing and child-raising services. According to the constructed mythology they were to obey men without question, without deviation from their primary obligations in private within the family and in public within the culture.

(1983, 15; emphasis added)

Attribution of Motherhood to "natural instinct" is a part of the "constructed mythology" of patriarchy about women.

The most interesting aspect of Johnson's poetry is her vacillation between the established norms of Motherhood, i.e., Motherhood as an "instinctive" reaction and the spasmodic awareness of the external factors that compel her to define and perform the role of the mother in a specified manner. If in a poem like "Service," she proclaims loving the "Children of men" (1922, 87, 4) as the greatest fulfilment of a woman's life, "Maternity" reveals her inability to revel in the romantic and idealized notions about Motherhood.

In "Black Woman," the dilemma of "Maternity" ends in a

in which Johnson lived because the emphasis has always been on fighting racism and sexism was considered a digression from the main issue. But for Johnson, sexism seems to be a more important issue because it divides men and women.

Besides all this, there is another aspect which should not be ignored. The poet who considered men "monsters," all through her discussion of Motherhood, converses only with a "male" child! It is a puzzling paradox. Are only "men" considered worthy of the invaluable inheritance from a mother? It is the son who is encouraged. It is the son about whom the mother worries. And it is the son who is looked up to. In none of her poems in "Motherhood" does she ever mention a female child in spite of being a woman.

Johnson in many of her poems displays an incredible lack of independence. Anger and rebellion are very occasional emotions in her repertoire. "Ivy," one of her poems from An Autumn Love Cycle captures the yearning of a woman who needs completion to her life:

I as a woman
 which means
 I am insufficient
 I need
 Something to hold me
 Or perhaps uphold
 I as a woman.

(1928, 25)

Johnson, more often than not, sounds as though she has accepted her role in the "constructed mythology"--the role of a devout companion to man and an inspirer of male children to rebellion.

Although "My Boy," highlights again this role of an inspirer, it makes more sense when studied in the light of Langston Hughes' "Spirituals." In the latter, it is the progeny who call upon their Mother to sing, which give her strength on which they rely. Basically for Hughes, the act of singing is a source of strength and hope. But Johnson's perception of "song" is quite the contrary. Here it is the Black Mother telling her son:

O Sing, my lark, your matin song
of joyous rhapsody,
Distil the sweetness of the hours
In gladsome ecstasy. (1922, 46, 9-12)

Johnson's "song" has an emotional role and not a political one. Her perception is Dunbarian (if I may use the term). Paul Laurence Dunbar in his "The Poet and His song" says:

A song is but a little thing
And yet what joy it is to sing
(1913, 4, 1-2)

and affirms by saying:

I sing my song and all is well.
(1913, 4, 8)

Both Dunbar in this poem and Johnson pit "song" against sorrow and draw chiefly joy from it. Song gives emotional strength. In the case of Hughes, "song" performs a communal purpose. It not only gives spiritual and psychological courage to the Black Mother but to the whole community. It helps build the emotional strength of the community, "Something strong to put my hands on" (1919, 28, 3). So it has a spiritual as well as a political

purpose.

Moreover, Johnson's obsession with sadness or the "tragic mystery" that Robert Kerlin talks about (qtd. in Fletcher 1987, 156), aborts the "joyous rhapsody." The mother laments:

Sing, sing your song, my bonny lark,
Before it melts in tears!

(1922, 46, 15-16)

Kerlin says that Johnson's "lyric cry" has been unmatched for its "piercing" quality which has "perfect restraint" and "sure artistry" (qtd. in Fletcher 1987, 156). Criticism like this convinces one, that Johnson, despite her conscious attempts at racial, and sexual assertion in Bronze and in some other poems, rarely moved away from the "eternal feminine" figure that Alain Locke talks about in his Foreword to An Autumn Love Cycle (1928, xvi). Femininity has always been equated by patriarchy with fragility and dependence and has been idealized. Sadness is a part of this fragility. William Stanley Braithwaite makes a highly debatable remark in this regard. He says that "sadness is a kind of felicity with woman," and "through this inexplicable felicity" women "touched... reality" intuitively (Introduction, 1971, ix). To say that women perceived reality through sadness could be accepted, but to equate sadness with "felicity" and proclaim it and intuition as essential traits of women, only echoes patriarchal definitions of femininity and Braithwaite's endorsement of them.

In Johnson's case, sadness does not seem to be "felicity." If "Black Woman" resolves the dilemma of "Maternity" to bear or not to bear the child, "Little Son" intensifies the dilemma.

Johnson touches the reality of this dilemma which is tragic:

The very acme of my woe,
 The pivot of my pride,
 My consolation, and my hope
 Deferred, but not denied. (1922, 49, 1-4)

It is an emotional question for the mother: what exactly is her reaction to having a child? The mother struggles to define Motherhood for herself with her emotional realm in a quandary. And this crisis reaches its zenith when she says,

The very world epitomized
 In turmoil and delight. (1922, 49, 7-8)

This is the sadness of a Black Mother's life, and Johnson captures it brilliantly. To attribute "felicity" to that sadness or to that of any other woman would only be trying to make a positive and pleasant quality out of a tangible tragedy.

One major problem with analysing Johnson's poetry is that her poetry tends to get repetitive. It is not the case with Bronze or "Motherhood" alone but also with An Autumn Love Cycle and The Heart of a Woman. This could probably be because she has always "dug patiently in the veins of her own subjective experience" (Locke, Foreword 1928, xix) while writing poetry. Her expression of race-consciousness is done in a highly subjective manner. The first person is an active participant in her poetry. And it is the adherence to the "personal" combined with the purpose of making a statement about her racial identity which results in the expression of similar emotions in different words and imagery in different poems. In the poem

"Soldier" she says something which reiterates her perception of the role of women as mothers:

Though I should weep until judgment,
 How would it serve--
 Brave men are fighting, women speed them
 'Tis a day
 Of crucial conflict!

(1922, 68, 1-5; emphasis added)

And then she adds by saying:

... ..

 I'll close my eyes and smile, O Son of Mine
 Your cause is kingly! (1922, 68, 12-13)

Cedric Dover says that "her universal values, her influence on people far removed from her environment arise from a sensitive response to her own scene.... She has given us something of her own poetry and courage" (qtd. in Fletcher 1987, 154). It is not true to say that Johnson's poetry is merely maudlin. And at the same time, we cannot call her a "universal poet" and end it there. It is very important to remember that Johnson too, like Hughes, "risked" to be different if not simple. Even the most assertive racial poem of hers does not get carried away by the mere force of her ideological stance. She rarely lost her stamp and her "restraint" and "artistry" in style. It is this marriage of poesy with the awareness of her social, political and cultural environment that makes Johnson's poetry readable.

Although Johnson did not write poetry in her last years,

Hughes focussed on the socio-cultural and political climate till his last collection The Panther and the Lash. In my next chapter I shall be dealing with two poets, one of whom Amiri Baraka, was taking off to "fare high and far" to win the "Star-ways" (1922, 50, 10-12) as Johnson had dreamt. Nikki Giovanni, who joins him a little later continues the poetic explosion of Black Power. If Georgia Douglas Johnson had stopped her poetic pursuits by the 1930s, Langston Hughes handed over the blazing torch to his successors before drowning in the darkness of time.

Notes

1. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his introduction to the anthology of black women's works, Reading Black Reading Feminist, quotes Mary Helen Washington's question:

... why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist always represented as a black man? How does the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for its survival? (1990, 5)

Gates goes on to quote her own answer which is more important:

What we have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that that power has always been in the hands of men—mostly white and some black. Women are the disinherited.... The appropriation by men of the power to define tradition accounts for women's absence from our records. (1990, 5-6)

2. Robert Hyden in his preface to the Atheneum edition of The New Negro ed. by Dr. Alain Locke describes the spirit of the New Negro as one that "articulates the crucial ideas of a generation in rebellion against accepted beliefs and engaged in racial self-discovery and cultural reassessment. It affirms the values of the Negro heritage and expresses hope for the future of the race in this country, stressing the black man's 'Americanism'" (Preface, xii). The New Negro is a monumental work, a manifesto and the proclamation of the birth of a new black man in the 1920s. This splendid collection contains the fiery writings of

young black writers like Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay etc., in different genres like fiction, drama, poetry, music, and the essay.

3. Calvin Hernton categorises women in Hughes' writings as the Earth Madonna, the Troubled Woman and the Warrior Woman. The Troubled Woman is described as "the suffering angel of unreturned love" (1987, 112). She is self-sacrificing, self-emaciating and exceptionally devoted to her man. She accepts dependents as natural.

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Chapter 3

"...the strong nigger feeling..."--
The inspiring and the rebellious Black Mother
in the poetry of
Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni

.... Help us. Women. Where
are you women, where, and who, and where,
and who, and will you help
us, will you open your bodysouls, will you lift
me up mother, will you
✓ let me help you, daughter, wife/lover, will you

(Amiri Baraka, "Beautiful Black Women,"
Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones,
1979, page 118, lines 16-19, emphasis added.)

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...

(Nikki Giovanni, "ego tripping." Ego-Tripping,
1973, 5, 47-51.)

In the late 1950s there was an explosion in the American literary scene. It was called LeRoi Jones, who, by the late 60s came to be known as Issamu Amiri Baraka. Young, intense and gloomy, this black man had opened an entirely new chapter in the history of not only African-American literature but American literature as well. Baraka's arrival into the American scene is best described in the words of Kimberly U. Benston:

Baraka entered the American consciousness not merely as a writer but as an event, a symbolic figure somehow combining the craft and insights of Euro-American radicalism with the rebellious energies of young Afro-America. (1978, 1)

In modern African-American literature, Baraka is a giant figure. If in the creative realm he is as prolific as Langston Hughes, as a scholar he is "DuBoisean" (Benston 1). In his whole poetic oeuvre we see Amiri Baraka emphasizing and reiterating the liberation of black people with the help of ideological programmes like Black Nationalism² and Black Power and at a later stage Socialist revolution. In a way Baraka's attitude towards black women represents the attitude of the majority of black men and most of the leaders of the Black Power movement.³ bell hooks, in her Ain't I a Woman quotes Baraka as saying:

Jim Brown put it pretty straight and this is really quite true. He says that there are black men and white men, then there are women. So you can indeed be going through a black militant thing and have yourself a woman. The fact that she happens to be black or white is no longer impressive to anybody, but a man who gets himself a woman is what's impressive. The battle is really between white men and black men....

(1981, 97)

By and large, Baraka's poetic world abounds with men. Women

appear very occasionally and very late in his career did Baraka begin to acknowledge the importance of black women in any struggle that black people would embark on. Baraka, therefore, envisages a secondary role for black women in his poetry. They ✓ either play a supportive role which is basically domestic in nature--wife, lover and mother--or an abstract role of, what Nikki Giovanni would sardonically term as, a "sweet inspiration" ✓ (1968, 38, 26). Women are never in the driver's seat along with men. In fact, the role of a "sweet inspiration" is what can be called the chief function of Baraka's "Mother." The advocacy of patriarchy and the definition of the Black Mother's role within the framework of patriarchy, makes Baraka's portrayal of Black Mother worth studying.

Nikki Giovanni, was no less an explosive poet. Giovanni's career began with the publication of Black Feeling, Black Talk in 1968. Giovanni was and has always been a phenomenon both as a person and a poet. An iconoclast of sorts, she is extremely individualistic and at the same time values family and community immensely. She believes, in fact, that loving one's own self is best expressed in one's love for one's family. In her autobiography called Gemini, she says, "If you don't love your mama and papa you don't love yourself" (1971, 31).

Nikki Giovanni is a phenomenon for a number of reasons. The most important of them are her very approach to creativity as well as her political commitment. She refuses to remain "prone" and declares:

I don't have any ideology. I don't have a lifestyle, either. I have my ideas and I have a life. (qtd. in Fowler 1992, 139)

Giovanni, more than anything else, values herself as a black woman and a mother. She outrightly repudiates the dictatorial and chauvinistic attitudes of the Black Power leaders asking one straight-forward question,

Is it necessary that I cease being a Black Woman so that he can be a man....

(qtd. in Fowler 1992, 47; emphasis added)

As an unwed mother, who has refused to divulge the name of the father of her child, Giovanni stands as the ultimate example of black woman's individuality, independence and self-sufficiency. She declares:

... we Black Women are the single group in the west intact... we are... the only group that derives its identity from itself... We measure ourselves by ourselves and I think that's a practice we can ill afford to lose. (qtd. in Fowler 1992, 97)

Right from her first volume of her poetry, Black Feeling, Black Talk to her last volume Those who Ride The Night Winds *. Giovanni has exhibited only one quality--assertion, assertion as a black individual, assertion as a black woman and most importantly, assertion as a woman with a right to Motherhood, in a patriarchal and racist world.

On the whole, Amiri Baraka has very few poems directly dealing with the Black Mother.³ Baraka's women, let alone the Mother, seldom lead the way. The poem that spells out Baraka's idea of black women which also includes the role of the Mother

is "Beautiful Black Women."

It is a very crucial poem in Baraka's poetic oeuvre not only because it deals with the role of black women and the Mother but also because it represents the typical male perspective of black women. The poem begins in a very unusual fashion:

Beautiful black women, fail, they act.

Stop them, raining,

They are so beautiful, we want them with

us. Stop them, raining.

Beautiful, stop raining, they fail. (1979, 118; 1-3)

The poem starts with "failure" on the part of black women. They act in spite of failing. And Baraka calls for stopping them. The reason for stopping them would be that the men "want them with us [them]" (1979, 118, 2). For me, the core line is:

... will you lift me up mother, will you

let me help you, daughter, wife/lover, will you.

(1979, 118, 18-19)

The subtle difference between the expectation from a mother and that from the daughter and the wife/lover needs to be observed. Mother is a source of strength who lifts up the black man and that derived strength is offered to the daughter and the wife/lover. Although the speaker seeks the help of black women by saying "women we need you" the objective of this request needs greater attention.

Help us get back what was always ours

(1979, 118, 16, emphasis added)

What then was always theirs, that needs the strength of a mother to gain back? Here the most debatable of the black man's concerns in the American racist society comes to the fore viz., lost manhood.

Kimberly W. Benston observes in the preface to Imamu Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays:

... the underlying topic of most Barakan pieces is seen to be (as Lula pointedly reminds Clay in Dutchman) manhood.

(1978, x)

In a way "Beautiful Black Women" is a loud cry for his lost manhood and latent disgruntlement at the "reigning, black queen" (1979, 118, 10).

The interesting pun on the word rain/reign reflects this aspect of the black male psyche. The word "rain" which is used initially can be interpreted as the overwhelming strength that black women are capable of. The speaker says:

Stop them, raining.

... ..

... ..

... .. Raining. Stop them.

(1979, 118, 1-4)

Suddenly this "rain" becomes "reign" when the speaker says:

... .. we flex

our muscles, turn to stare at our tormentor, we need you, Raining.

We need you, reigning, black queen.

(1979, 118, 8-10; *emphasis added*)

There is a sense of loss in the black male psyche. In order to flex muscles against oppression, he needs the psychological support of the black woman.

We fail them and their lips
stick out perpetually at our weakness.

(1979, 118, 3-4)

This lost manhood, which Baraka terms as a state of "detesticled" existence in his Home: Social Essays (1966, 221) worries the black man. And he is out to reclaim it. The fallen black man needs the Black Mother to 'lift' him up. It is with the reclaimed and regained manhood that the black man sees himself fighting oppression.

The importance attached to manhood by black men and the assumption that black women expected their men to 'behave' like men (which chiefly meant acting violent) is reflected in Eldridge Cleaver's emotionally charged essay "To All Black Women, From All Black Men" Cleaver laments:

Across the naked abyss of negated
masculinity, of four hundred years minus my
Balls, we face each other today, my
Queen... I feared to look into your eyes
because I knew I would find reflected there
a merciless indictment of my impotence and
a compelling challenge to redeem my
conquered manhood.

(1972, 375)

In "Beautiful Black Women" Amiri Baraka is saying the same

thing in a poetic fashion with a special note of additional importance, may be unwittingly, attached to the Black Mother. Although this poem places black men in a superior position of the real protector and defender of his women i.e., daughters, wives/ lovers, within that secondary sphere, the mother is expected to play the same role as "The Negro Mother" of Langston Hughes. However, in "The Negro Mother", the mother is the leader whereas here the man seeks her support. Mother here is a mere symbol. Real action is man's realm. In a way, Baraka is attributing to the Black Mother the quality of conserving the necessary inner strength for the survival of the race which is led by men.

This role of mother as a "strength-giver" is not consistent in Baraka's poetry. As I have already mentioned, his world is basically male-centred and he always addresses only the men (except on this occasion) as if Black America can be constructed only by black men with the help of their women. In "Young Soul," he advises the young men of Black America to get ready for violence:

Make some muscle
in your head, but
use the muscle
in yr heart. (1979, 73, 18-21)

But the root of the necessity for this violence is to

... think
of your parents, your mothers
and sisters, your bentslick
father... (1973, 73, 4-7)

The responsibility of protecting the community rests on young black men. It is worth noticing that Baraka equates "mothers" and "sisters" with "bentslick father," images of weakness which need the support and physical energy of the young black men. Here Baraka is challenging black machismo. Protecting mothers and sisters is the final test of one's manhood. This peculiar linking of male physical prowess with the need for the protection of women is an interesting aspect of Baraka's poetry.

However, there are instances where Baraka's portrayal of the Black Mother is different from weaker-sex-needing-protection type. Especially in the poem "Leroy" Baraka portrays a mother who is a metaphor for the whole black race. But his portrayal is different from Hughes' metaphorical Mother. Baraka's "Leroy" has a fleeting quality, a smooth and lambent movement from past to present without the participation of any second party such as the son or the daughter. The mother is observed from a distance, literally and figuratively by the poet and meditated upon. This contemplative mood endows the mother with the aura of a larger-than-life image. Baraka is talking about his mother but she is slowly transformed into the race's Mother.

The poem begins on a personal note.

I wanted to know my mother when she sat
looking sad across the campus in the late 20s
 into the future of the soul,

(1979, 134, 1-3, emphasis added)

I find the phrases I have emphasized very important in the light of the transformation I was mentioning above. These two phrases brilliantly capture the anguish of a mother who is tormented by

the idea of the future of "the soul." It is not the soul of the mother or any other individual but the soul of a people. The "sadness" in her face reflects not only her times but the times of her people because she is looking at "the late 20s." Her view is panoptic, "across the campus," and suddenly the poet begins to visualise her as more than a physical entity. The physical mother is suddenly metamorphosed into a giant figure. Baraka's language is simply superb in this context:

.... there were black angels
 straining above her head, carrying life from our
 ancestors,
 and knowledge, and the strong nigger feeling.

(1979, 134, 3-5, emphasis added)

The transformation from a physical entity to a representative metaphor is achieved with magical fluidity. Suddenly the poet's mother becomes a mythic figure, the Black Mother, who is the immaculate symbol of black heritage ("our ancestors"), culture and tradition ("our knowledge") and more than these, an assertion of Blackness ("the strong nigger feeling"). Interestingly this Mother, during the transformation, is shown as undergoing a deep psychological change herself. She is "getting into new blues, from the old ones" (1979, 134, 6-7). Ralph Ellison's definition of blues as a form helps us here:

As a form, the blues is an autobiographical
 chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed
 lyrically. (qtd. in Baker 1988, 133)

The Mother is moving away from those catastrophic chronicles into a new blues where "the trips and passions" are "showered on

her by her own" (1979, 134, 7-8). Blues, whether old or new, are a vehicle of psychological sustenance and a source of inner strength. Their texture might change but their function in the African-American community is vital.

The mythic Mother conserves the knowledge and wisdom of the black people. This "hypnotizing" Mother-figure, passes on the knowledge to the poet as well as to all the black people. Here the speaker becomes conscious of his responsibility as the true Son of his Mother:

When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to
black people. (1979, 134, 11-12)

The speaker promises to "will" his consciousness to his people. It is an intelligent use of the word by Baraka. Bequeathing the consciousness which is enriched by the knowledge passed on to him by his mother gives meaning to his life as a creative artist. Baraka, the poet, emerges here and pledges to perform this role of an artist conscientiously.

The concluding lines are very important. They capture the sudden and enormous change that has occurred in Baraka's own consciousness:

May they pick me apart and take the
useful parts... And leave
the bitter bullshit rotten white parts
alone. (1979, 134, 11-14)

For Amiri Baraka himself it is a transformation. From, what Onwuchekwa Jemie calls, "largely autobiographical and confessional, death-obsessed, sex-obsessed" early poetry,

Baraka has come a long way.

"Leroy" marks a total departure from his previous spiritual and personal agonies and as Lloyd W. Brown rightly observes, "combines the search for a positive black awareness with an increasingly ferocious assault on white racism and Western culture" (1980, 104). No wonder Baraka says "leave the bitter bullshit rotten white parts." Blackness, as an awareness and a new consciousness descends on Baraka's mind and the source of this momentous descent is the Black Mother. So there is a two-fold transformation in this poem. The physical Mother transforms into the mythic Black Mother effecting an epiphanic transformation in the poet's consciousness itself. The Black Mother is not only a metaphor for the race but also an abstract yet tangible embodiment of Blackness. Thus "Leroy" signifies Baraka's victory as an artist in the battle between his depressing past and his new assertive Black Self.

Just as Langston Hughes and Nikki Giovanni (as I shall show in my analysis of her poetry) extend their image of the Black Mother to Africa, Baraka also envisions Africa as a Mother-figure. His "Africa Africa Africa" is a perfect example of the personification of Africa, the Motherland. This poem echoes the fervour of Baraka's belief in Black Nationalism. This poem conclusively declares the necessity for a black person to acknowledge his/her ties with Africa:

Africa

Africa

Africa

beat it in your mouth

beat it through your veins

beat it in the green earth, your mother
 beat it in the tall forests....

(1979, 175, 11-17; emphasis added)

Baraka introduces chanting and repetition to drive the message home strongly.

Africa

Africa

Ahoo

Ahooooo hoooo

Ahoo

Ahooooo hoooo

(1979, 175, 5-10)

In his poetry Baraka uses all possible methods to invoke the nationalistic fervour for Africa. The bond with Africa is equated with the bond with Mother. The "green earth" as contrasted with the coldness of the West, is the black man's Mother. Andrea Benton Rushing makes an insightful remark in this regard:

It is rare to find Afro-American mother likened to the earth; this may be because we are not still a peasant people or because, after the agonies of slavery and Reconstruction, we are too bitter about the land to use it as a nurturing metaphor.

(1978, 75)

The linking of the mother with the earth is done by African-

American poets. The earth is not America but Africa:

**Ah, you remember us? The Africans. The Children
of the Sun. Africans.**

Yes. Africans. (1979, 176, 51-53)

The Sun has always been a symbol of Motherland in the African-American consciousness and Baraka invokes this consciousness by making the Sun a parent-figure.

What is striking in this poem is the pure physicality of the relationship between African-Americans and their Motherland. The identification with Africa is not only reiterated verbally ("beat it in your mouth") but assimilation of that idea into one's body ("through your veins") is also called for. Even the image of the Sun represents warmth, an experience that brings to mind not only a geographical entity called Africa, but also that rich experience from which black people had been violently alienated. The whole poem talks about bringing together the children and their Mother, not in literal terms but in terms of recognising and embracing one's own roots:

... we claim whatever space our
righteous selves have died upon...

...

...

**we want all of the Africans
to reach out for each other**

...

...

... move in the same move to claim what they need to
survive in cold space.

(1979, 176, 40-48)

Here the Black Mother becomes a nationalistic and cultural ideal to aspire for and attain. Achieving unity among black people is reclaiming the lost roots which are in Africa, the green earth, the Mother.

As Lee A. Jacobus rightly points out, his poetry "describes a quest for a moral order which he feels ultimately impelled to create for himself and on his own terms" (1978, 97; emphasis added). In his order of things the Black Mother is a source of strength, an ideal, an abstract representation of Blackness and a metaphor for the race. But the Black Mother is also a woman, who in Baraka's communal framework, needs to be protected on account of being weaker. In Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son" the Mother climbs the ladder of life and stands physically as an exemplifying leader. Baraka's portrayal of the Black Mother shows the Mother bolstering the black man's psychological strength and courage but in the end turns to him for protection.

I agree with Werner Sollors only partially when he says that much of Baraka's poetry in the early 60s "reflects the transposition of the struggle between 'literature' and 'life' from the 'inside' of the poet's consciousness to the 'outside' of American political and ethnic reality" (1978, 94), because if the transposition to American political and ethnic reality has taken place, then Baraka's world cannot and should not be patriarchal. He should be cognisant of the enormous responsibilities that black women shoulder in all possible aspects of black life, not just as metaphors but as tangible individuals. I disagree with Kimberly U. Benston also who opines that Baraka's voice "does not remain with the speaker but is

collective, striving to make the communal audience speakers too..." (1978, 13, emphasis added). One wonders, if a "voice" that calls for a secondary status to women can be called a "collective" voice that speaks for its community.

I ask the same question that Clyde Taylor asks, "whether Baraka's creative impulse, which is essentially underground, hip, urban and avant-garde, can be made to speak for a nation of black people rather than for a set of black nationalists" (1978, 117). For me the big question is not so much whether Baraka talked "about" Black Mother than whether he spoke "for" the Black Mother. His rhetoric about black women with all its nationalistic emphases is no doubt powerful, but is it representative of the large section of black women (which, of course, includes mothers) who are a part of the Black Community? Baraka's later poetry also, i.e., his pre-socialist In Our Terribleness and It's Nation Time and his loud, socialist Hard Facts does not accommodate women in any important spheres of activity.

In Our Terribleness, which is sub-titled (Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style) reiterates in the long poem "Sisters" that black women are:

... Our mothers and sisters and wives that we
pledge to protect and love...

(1970, n. page , 29-30)

Let us look at the following lines from the poem "The Nation is Like Ourselves":

We need need you bbbaby man, we need all the
blood we gotta

get some blood.... (1979, 192, 115-16)

These anticipate the rhetorical tone of Hard Facts represented in the lines from "Revolutionary Love"

Your man better be a revolution
for you to love him...

(1979, 241, 3-4; emphasis added)

Motherhood might have been given a slightly more visible role by Baraka than the other roles of women but his attitude towards women is consistently the same--companions no doubt but only to be led and protected by black men. For this reason, writers like Sonia Sanchez were preferred to writers like Nikki Giovanni because Sanchez, although a believer in her own way in the importance of women, considers black women essentially companions who assist black men. In her "Introduction (Queens of the Universe)" (part one), Sanchez says:

the job of Black/wooooomen is to deal with
this (racism)

under the direction of Black men
(1974, 12, 37-38)

As I have already mentioned, studying Giovanni's poetry in this light would be a fruitful exercise because it opens up vistas hitherto unacknowledged by and unknown to black men as well as men in general and many readers of African American poetry.

Before the analysis I have to mention that I shall take up only four of the seven volumes of poetry that Giovanni has published, again due to non-availability of the last three. Although I examine Black Feeling, Black Talk; Black Judgement

and Ego-Tripping, my main thrust will be on My House as I consider it the most seminal of all her volumes. My House exemplifies Giovanni's attitude towards the very act of writing poetry and also marks a phase in her career in which she asserted herself as a woman with a right to herself.

Nikki Giovanni hated to conform. She has refused to be a part of any organized ideological programme and has always written as an individual black woman. Her fiery individuality had upset many black male leaders including Amiri Baraka who has excluded her from the 1983 black women's poetry anthology Confirmation.⁷ But Giovanni has never budged. Of course, she does believe in certain principles and as Virginia Fowler puts it, she is "a political poet, although not an ideological one" and "a spiritual poet, although not a religious one" (Preface 1992, x).

Giovanni's portrayal of the Black Mother assumes great importance because of the context in which she has written poetry. Giovanni is described by Ida Lewis in her Foreword to My House as "a product of the thunderous and explosive sixties, endowed with a powerful and inquiring mind absorbed with the Black America of that decade" (1972, x-xi). But at the same time, Giovanni has never conformed to the Black male imposition that non-revolutionary poetry should not be written during the period of revolution. For her, her self is as important as her people. She "lays claim to her exclusive right to determine the meaning of her life and inscribes the centrality of family and love in that life" (Fowler 1992, 1).

In her earlier volumes like Black Feeling, Black Talk and Black Judgement, however, Giovanni exhibits the rage she has

accumulated looking at the oppressive white society. That was a period of "nigger, can you kill" syndrome (1974, 57).

The earlier volumes written under the influence of Black Power, show incipient signs of Giovanni's growing concern for black women and their need for individuality. Poems like "On Hearing 'The Girl with Flaxen Hair'" and "Seduction" are representative of these signs. The former poem contrasts the white women with the black women by choosing "hair" as the referent besides exploring the economic factors responsible for the deprivation of culture to blacks in America. In "Of Liberation" Giovanni hints at the centrality of black women in any revolution in Black America, by portraying women as the flag-makers and flag-bearers. "Seduction," an apparently humorous poem about a black man who is so engrossed in his ideological rhetoric that he is not even aware of his being seduced, is about the "schism between the black man and the black woman" (Fowler 1992, 30). The last line of the poem, where the man asks the speaker "Isn't this counter-revolutionary?" (1968, 38, 26) highlights this schism.

My House, Giovanni's third major volume itself is a revolution of sorts. It makes Giovanni's intentions clear. In this collection Giovanni asserts her freedom and authority as rights to be claimed, not privileges to be granted. And in My House, Giovanni elaborately discusses the various facts and dimensions of Motherhood and the very image of the Black Mother.

My House is divided into two sections i.e., "The Rooms Inside" and "The Rooms Outside." The intention is to assert herself as an independent and individual woman (The Rooms Inside) besides a race conscious poet/artist/activist (The Rooms

Outside). The second poem in the first section talks about the mother. Titled "Mothers," this poem tries to present a representative Mother-figure. The speaker's mother in the poem represents the plural in the title.

This poem, like Giovanni's other poems, has a quality of a musical crescendo. She begins the poem as if she is talking to the reader and then slowly pulls him/her into a complex composition of images, each individual but harmonious when read together. In "Mothers" one can see how this unique technique contributes to the total emotion of the poem.

"Mothers" has an innocent and banal beginning:

the last time i was home
 to see my mother we kissed
 exchanged pleasantries...
 pulled a warm
 comforting silence around
 us and read separate books (1972, 6, 1-6)

There is abounding love. But there is also an already-understood individuality--the daughter and her mother "read separate books." By avoiding the use of capital "I" while referring to herself, the speaker contrasts herself with her mother. One night she sees her mother in the kitchen sitting on a chair engulfed by moonlight. This dreamy imagery separates the daughter from the mother, elevating the latter to a figure of magical divinity:

her hair was three-quarters her height
 which made me a strong believer
 in the samson myth

and very black

(1972, 7, 22-24)

This reference to "hair" as a symbol of strength and race is a unique touch in this poem. It is not just the strength of an individual but the strength of a woman who asserts herself by unfurling her identity as a black woman.

The poet's mother is a symbol of love:

She was very deliberately waiting
perhaps for my father to come home
 from his night job or may be for a dream
 that had promised to come by

(1972, 7, 27-30; emphasis added)

The first two lines could be hastily interpreted as the mother actively participating in a patriarchal scheme of things. But Giovanni goes beyond categories, exploring the depths of human spirit without ideological veneer. Waiting for her husband or waiting for a dream, the speaker's mother exudes what Giovanni has always emphasized, the "human connection." For her the "human connection is love, is the revolution" (Fowler 1992, 77).

The poet's mother teaches her a song, which:

i taught it to my son
 who recited it for her (1972, 7, 36-37)

This completes the human connection. The mother passes on to her successor, another mother, the strength of divine benediction:

god bless the moon
 and god bless me (1972, 7, 34-35)

The young mother passes on to her son:

to bear the pleasures
as we have borne the pains

(1972, 7, 39-40)

The title "Mothers" is fully justified by the end of the poem. The elder mother preserves a legacy of inner strength and courage in the human struggle against all odds. The inheritor, the son, is taught the importance of that legacy by his mother. It is important to note here that Giovanni is also referring to a "son" and not a daughter. Although there seems to be a contradiction, it would only be hasty to assume that even Giovanni considers only men as potential revolutionaries. When I discuss "poem for black boys" from Ego-Tripping, I shall throw more light on this aspect.

Another kind of legacy is described in the poem "Legacies," which talks about a grandmother and a granddaughter. The old woman says, "I want chu to learn how to make rolls" (1972, 5, 3).

The little girl refuses to learn it because--Giovanni's reasoning here is endearing--.

that would mean when the old one died
she would be less

dependent on her spirit

(1972, 5, 8-9)

The grandmother, with "her lips poked out" (1972, 5, 12) says "lord these children" (1972, 5, 14-15). But it is neither anger nor frustration and here comes the superb concluding touch:

neither of them ever

said what they meant
and i guess nobody ever does

(1972, 5, 16-18; emphasis added)

The grandmother knows what she represents to her granddaughter-- strength and individuality. The latter responds to the former's call quite obediently, "Yes, ma'am" (1972, 5, 2).

But by obeying the command of her grandmother meekly, the granddaughter would only lose her individuality. The grandmother has always been the silent "model" for the granddaughter, a silent example of self-reliance and stern individuality. She cannot afford to lose something which she has inherited from her female ancestor. The pleasant part of the whole exchange is that both of them know it. It is a legacy whose flow none can stop. This unique bond between the grandmother and the granddaughter is not touched upon by Baraka but Langston Hughes portrays a similar exchange in his "Mama and Daughter." And it is worth noting that Giovanni considers herself belonging to the tradition of Langston Hughes (Fowler 1992, 145).

"Africa I," from the second section "The Rooms Outside," pictures the Black Mother as a larger-than-life figure. Here Giovanni shares her sentiments about Africa with both Amiri Baraka and Langston Hughes. Africa in this poem is both a geographical entity and a concept of heritage. Giovanni captures this admirably in the opening lines of the poem:

[O]n the bite of a kola nut
I was so high the clouds blanketing
africa (1972, 47, 1-3)

The poem suddenly takes a funny turn with the speaker seeing

a young lioness sat smoking a pipe
while her cubs waved up at the plane

(1972, 47, 7-8)

When the speaker is not able to decide whether it is dream or reality, her grandmother appears unexpectedly and advises her to

call it

like you see it

(1972, 47, 15-16)

All these seemingly absurd exchanges reflect the speaker's abounding excitement at the sight of Africa, her Motherland. But this excitement has an undercurrent, the awareness of the past, the history, and the alienation:

... Something else said quietly
your mother may be glad to see you
but she may also remember why
you went away

(1972, 47, 24-27)

Giovanni's poem does not have the political and nationalistic overtones of Amiri Baraka's "Africa Africa Africa." In its tone and feeling it echoes more or less Langston Hughes's "Africa" where the continent epitomizes a persona with which the poetic persona feels bonded and attached.

For Giovanni, Africa is the Mother who is happy to see her children back but is aware of the irreversible truth that these children have lost their roots long long ago. She, the Motherland, is aware but not unhappy and that is the magnanimity of the Black Mother. She knows her struggle. But still she embraces her children with love and care and gives a sense of belonging. And this sense of belonging is very important for

Giovanni whose emphasis has always been on human connection.

In a sequel to "Africa I," called "Africa II" Giovanni compares Africa with a young black man bathing whose existence and meaning is incomplete without the presence of a black woman:

... i wanted to
 sink my teeth into his thigh
 and tell him he would never be
 clean until he can
 possess me (1972, 50, 32-36)

This image of consummation of the young black man with the young black woman is very significant in the light of "Africa I," where Africa is a Mother. For Giovanni woman as Mother is the centre of all creation. She says:

... it is so illogical to think that any
 system that intended to support life first
 created 'man'. However would it perpetuate
 itself? (1994, 184)

Giovanni criticizes Sigmund Freud's concept of "Penis-envy" saying "There is no penis envy; there is vaginal envy" (1994, 169). The possible reason for vaginal envy is Motherhood. Women "create" human beings. Men are a part of that process but without the woman there is no perpetuation of the human race. She even concludes that the "greatest challenge of the twenty-first century will be reconciling the human male to his penis" (1994, 170).

For Giovanni, Motherhood is a willing choice and not an imposition. A woman, she has always believed, has a right to

Motherhood. That is why she despises categories like "unwed Mother" at which she scoffs in the poem "categories":

... i just realized that
i'm bored with categories.

(1972, 39-40; emphasis added)

Her tone reflects her hatred for the pettiness of the society around her and at the same time her wry nonchalance. For Giovanni "decision-making" is very important. Once she "decides" to be a Mother (even without divulging the name of her child's father), she goes ahead with it at any cost.

The grandest of Giovanni's celebrations of female centrality can be found in "ego-tripping" from the collection Ego-Tripping. Giovanni gives a sub-title to the poem in parenthesis "(there may be a reason why)" which is her way of poking at male chauvinists.

The poem is a mammoth celebration of the black woman. It is more appropriate to call the woman in this poem, the "Universal Mother." This poem is an extraordinary blend of sardonic humour, positive arrogance, poetic exaggeration and serious historicism:

I was born in the congo
I walked to the fertile crescent and built
the sphinx
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
that only glows every one hundred years falls
into the centre giving divine perfect light
I am bad

(1973, 3, 1-7)

It is one of the rare occasions where Giovanni uses the capital

I to emphasize the significance of the Black Woman. She equates the self with God; hence the capital "I."

I sat on the throne
drinking nectar with allah (1973, 3, 8-9)

She traces her lineage to "nefertiti" of Egypt. Virtually everything recognizably great is claimed by this ego-tripper as her own. She has created the Nile, the Sahara and got Rome from her son Hannibal as a gift for "mother's day."

The concluding part of the poem (which I have already used as the epigraph) defies the universal Mother, the unquestionable creator:

I'm so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal
I cannot be comprehended
except by my permission (1973, 5, 47-49)

"ego-tripping" is some sort of a final statement of Nikki Giovanni about not just the Black Mother, or the black people but about women. Virginia Fowler rightly points out that "ego-tripping" is Giovanni's signature poem, because it identifies woman as the creator of the world and as a "shaper of every significant accomplishment of civilization," and that is why it is Giovanni's "memorandum" to the world about creation (Fowler 1992, 56).

This "creative" ability of a different kind is poignantly portrayed in the poem "My Tower (for Barb and Anthony)," again from My House where Giovanni describes the very process of becoming a mother:

i have built my dreams on the love of a man

holding a nation in his palm asking me the
time of day

(1972, 45, 5-6)

The obvious nonchalance of the man towards the woman who loves him is well captured in the above lines. The realization of the beginning of Motherhood is thrilling for the mother.

when this tiny grain i hardly noticed
crept inside.

... ..

... a black pearl of immeasurable worth
that only i could spin around

(1972, 45, 9-13)

But the mother is not just bearing a child but a whole nation which gives her tremendous strength to protect her castle of dreams. The unique paradox of Motherhood is the absence of difference between loss and gain.

i was full and complete while emptying my womb
and the sea ebbed ohhhhhhhhh
what a pretty little baby

(1972, 45, 20-22)

In this context, remembering Alice Walker's statement that giving birth to a child can be a political act, becomes all the more relevant. For Giovanni Motherhood enables the poet in her

to discover and express an essential part
of her being--the most essential part,
perhaps. It is a more liberating and
revolutionary activity than being a

political activist or spokesperson.

(Fowler 1992, 49)

Giovanni reiterates her belief in the centrality of the Black Mother in building a true Black Nation.

If building a Black Nation needs a revolution, a violent one, the Black Mother is ready to send her sons. Even Giovanni does not discount the importance of men in revolution. In spite of championing women's role in building the Black Nation, Giovanni makes an interesting remark in Gemini about Black men:

The weight of Blackness ultimately falls on Black men. And it is their response which will determine our position. (1971, 104)

In her "poem for black boys" from Ego-Tripping, advises black boys:

You should play run-away-slave
or Mau Mau
These are more in line with your history
(1972, 11, 4-6)

The Black Mother is a source of revolutionary fervour both literally and symbolically:

... a company called Revolution has just issued
a special kit for little boys
called Burn Baby
I'm told it has full instructions on how to siphon gas
and fill a bottle

(1972, 12, 23-27)

Giovanni firmly concludes that the black boys should play the game of revolution to the best of their ability and be true heroes.

... you my children of battle, are our heroes
 you must invent your games and teach us old
ones how to play

(1972, 12, 35-37; emphasis added)

Here the Mother, besides encouraging her children, expresses her desire to participate in the revolution. She does not want to remain a "sweet inspiration" as the speaker in the poem "dreams" says but wants to do "what a woman does when she's natural" and have a revolution as the speaker of the poem "revolutionary dreams" would say (1973, 28, 15-16).

In her dedication poem to Re:Creation, says, that her son

defined my nature
 and gave me a new name (mossy)
 which supersedes all others
 controls my life
 and makes me glad
 that he does

(qtd. in Fowler 1992, 49)

As a mother Giovanni has always maintained that she would want her son to be independent, decisive and beyond her control. In her conversation with Margaret Walker, Giovanni states that she wants her son to be "competent to judge" and make his own decisions (1974, 12).

Although Giovanni believes in female centrality or to be

more precise, the centrality of woman as mother in this world, ✓
 she never adopts any radically exclusivist stance about black
 men. In the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:

...[H]aving been excluded from
 representational authority for so long,
 black feminists have declined to respond
 with a counter-politics of exclusion.

(1990, 8)

A poem like "beautiful black men (with compliments and apologies
 to all not mentioned by name)" displays this quality in her
 poetry:

... i scream and stamp and shout
 for more beautiful beautiful beautiful
 black men with outasight afros.

(1973, 25, 25-27)

One sees only youthful enthusiasm but no penis-envy in her
 attitude, unlike many a black male poet/writer who considered men
 the leaders and women, the followers. It is here that Giovanni's
 idea of herself as both a woman and a Black becomes all the more
 pertinent. Givoanni's world view is broad and all-encompassing
 without the constraints of narrow ideological standpoints. She
 is politically conscious but would detest to be a mere political
 poet. She might look at America as a Black individual but she
 also sees the whole world as a woman and a mother. That is why
 she emphasizes human connection.

Although both Baraka and Giovanni see little difference
 between politics and life, for Giovanni "the universal must be
 found as it is manifest in the particular" (Fowler 1992, 73).

That is exactly why her portrayal of the Black Mother is not one sided. Although she has written in a specific poetic, political and cultural context, in a particular society, the complexity of the emotion of Motherhood that she has been able to evoke is unique. In the case of Baraka, fervent political commitment and obsession with a goal [which is also justifiable if not for his chauvinism] influence his view of the Black Mother. .

Notes

1. Charlie Reilly quotes Baraka in the Introduction of Conversations with Amiri Baraka:

The man who buried Malcolm X, gave me the name Ameer Baraka. Later on I met Ron Karenga who gave me the name Imamu and changed Ameer to Amiri. (1994, x)

According to Reilly Baraka later told William J. Harris that he dropped the word "Imamu" from his name because when he went to Africa people sought his blessings thinking that he was really a priest.

2. Baraka's 1960 trip to Cuba as a guest of the Fidel Castro Government was a significant event in his life, the product of which was his second volume of poetry titled The Dead Lecturer (1964). Poems like "For Edward Dorn," "As Agony, As Now," "Black Dada Nihilismus," etc. mark this event. Much of his poetry all through the 60s reflects intense black nationalistic fervour, mostly inspired by the teachings of Malcolm X. In the late 60s Baraka was influenced by Ron Karenga's doctrine of Black Nationalism and his Black Magic: The Collected Poetry reflects this influence.

3. When asked what the role of black women in the Black Power movement was, Stokely Carmichael, who coined the phrase 'Black Power' in 1966, was supposed to have remarked, "prone" (Giovanni 1994, 39).

4. I shall not be dealing with this collection. I make this remark on the basis of the poems I could read from this collection in Virginia Fowler's Nikki Giovanni.

5. Baraka did say that his grandmother was his "heart and soul." She has tried to impart religious conviction and a sense of respectability in him. Many of his political and artistic beliefs are acquired from his own experiences. See Amiri Baraka by Bob Bernotas.

6. Onwuchekwa Jemie points out that Amiri Baraka's earlier poetry was influenced by the impact of Beat Movement led by Allen Ginsberg and the proponder of projectivism, Charles Olson. Jemie describes it as "the bohemian posturings and narcissistic navel-gazing of the artist-as-outsider, martyr, accompanied by verbal obscenities as rebellion" (172).

7. The poetry of Nikki Giovanni was excluded from the collection Confirmation on charges that she visited South Africa much against the wishes of the revolutionary leaders. In an interview with Virginia Fowler, Giovanni calls Baraka "a liar" and says that it was more out of personal grudge that her poetry was excluded.

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Chapter 4

Conclusion;

I do not know much about "conclusions" in other kinds of exercises but concluding a dissertation is agonising as well as relieving. The "relief" part of it is obvious and understandable whereas the "agonising" part calls for some explanation.

In my Preface, I mentioned that analysis of poetry is both challenging and formidable for me. This analysis, particularly has been the most formidable in my (although short) courtship with academics. Langston Hughes makes me ecstatic; I would call him the king of African-American poetry. Georgia Douglas Johnson evokes veneration and puzzlement; Amiri Baraka shocks, sometimes with his genius and often with his views; and Nikki Giovanni, whose poetry was the prime culprit in making this thesis so long (my original idea was to deal with Hughes and Baraka only, but Giovanni is infectious!), will remain the princess as far as African-American poetry is concerned.

Both Hughes and Johnson had careers spanning almost all major literary movements of this century. However, as I have already mentioned, both these poets are fascinating not because of the quantity of their output but because of the content and concerns of their works. Hughes is unique for his sheer range and depth. His portrayal of the Black Mother is admirable because of his ability in bringing out her different faces and facets. Although caught in the male centred discourse

occasionally Hughes does not neglect the importance of the interaction between the mother and the daughter. However, these exchanges are social and familial in nature and rarely political. They either share secrets relating to personal lives like in "Mama and Daughter" or emotional trauma arising from disillusionment like in "Graduation." But he emphasizes the right of a woman to her own life and Motherhood in a "S-sss-ss-sh." In both "Mother to Son" and "The Negro Mother" it may not be accidental that the mother addresses only the sons but at the same time it is not a deliberate exclusionistic view of women. If that were the case Hughes would not have even portrayed the exemplifying mother who physically fights against odds in the above mentioned poems.

Quite interestingly Georgia Douglas Johnson too addresses only sons and not daughters even when she is most fervent in her racial assertion. My intention is not to judge Johnson out of her context but at the same time Johnson's point of view cannot entirely be attributed to her times. Living in the midst of male dominance Johnson did exhibit flashes of rebellion in her poetry, especially in Bronze, which Johnson wrote after being pressurised by the public opinion that she lacked race consciousness. A collection which should have been more deliberate and laboured, sounds, to me, the most spontaneous of her works. However, she preferred to get back to her "original" way of writing where racial identity is not emphasized, with An Autumn Love Cycle.

It would be worthwhile comparing Johnson with Giovanni. There is a difference in their perception of Motherhood although their attitudes as women seem to concur. Johnson's "Motherhood"

mainly deals with Mother as a martyr. She sacrifices her joys for her children, i.e., sons. Even her anger is born out of helplessness rather than assertion whereas Giovanni's mother represents assertion. Even though Giovanni talks about sons becoming revolutionaries, she expresses the mother's desire to participate in the destruction of the White values. She celebrates the unfettered freedom of a woman as much as emphasizing her accountability to her posterity. Although she does not exclude men in building the community Motherhood is completely the realm of the woman. Giovanni rejects authority in this regard. She would never say something like "I am a woman/which means/I am insufficient," as Johnson would say (1928, 25, 1-3). If Giovanni highlights the greatness of Motherhood by portraying the specific figure called the Black Mother Johnson aims at proving herself to both the White and the Black worlds that she is a black woman who is proud to be one. Her "universality" does not reflect her racial and cultural background. It is more in conformity with the traditional sense of that phrase, that is transcending geographical, social and cultural barriers. This is her choice and here Giovanni concurs with Johnson. Giovanni too refuses to be prone and write with any ideological programme.

Amiri Baraka is in a different league altogether. In all his writings he preaches rebellion mostly violent, against the racist white society. Although he has been fighting for the cause of the liberation of the black people from a racist and a patriarchal society through various ideological frameworks, he fails to dissociate himself from patriarchal notions. It is worthwhile seeing how Baraka's critique of the white man's

definition of manhood exposes his own patriarchal attitude. In his Home: Social Essays Baraka says:

Manhood is deemed the ability to oppress by the white man. At least, one is more of a man in the sense of being self-sufficient able to provide for yourself and your family. (1966, 218)

Nothing can state more clearly that Baraka envisages the man as the head of the family. Manhood is exemplified in a man's ability to provide for himself and his family. Baraka's obsession with his goal, his passion, his anger, and his sense of urgency seem to have affected his ability to have a broader and panoptic view.

Well, I call conclusions "agonising" precisely because of the feeling I have as I conclude now. My alienation to the culture on which I am commenting makes it difficult to pass judgements on the basis of anything else except the poetry I have read. But since I consider poetry one of the efficacious ways of expressing and celebrating a culture, I take the liberty to comment and judge. My only qualification in this exercise may be that I am a fellow human being. What Toni Morrison says about Motherhood would perhaps strengthen my claim to this qualification:

It is a timeless, ahistorical force with all the glories and limitations that pure nature imposes, even when colored, camouflaged by its many cultural versions. (1992, 52)

How true!

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