



# The Child & The Fantastic

Edited by Anto Thomas C. & John E. D.

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**&**

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# Resisting Erasure: A Celebration of Blackness in the Children's Poems of Nikki Giovanni

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America is a multicultural society where the "them and us" binaries exist. This is felt more by ethnic identities in cultural encounters. Multicultural white America is tolerant to ethnic minorities like Native Americans, Chinese Americans or Afro-Americans. The word tolerance implies a pejorative undertone indicating the condescending attitude of the mainstream towards minority groups. Children growing up in an atmosphere charged with animosity and hostility are bound to develop an inferiority complex or rebellious tendencies, especially if they are on the wrong side of the experiential grid. Physical and psychological alienation can retard their minds.

Nikki Giovanni is a fourth generation slave immigrant. She has written several poems and stories for Black children. Her books carry illustrations and her poems have a certain rhythm to it that are appealing to children. She writes, and consciously and unconsciously unburdens her mixed cultural baggage as an Afro-American. She is the "Princess of Black poetry" with a career spanning more than thirty years. She has contributed to Children's Literature by bringing out several poems and stories for children. The key concepts communicated to children are that love and humanism is more important than material possessions. Her poems are a mirror of the social consciousness of the sixties. This study is on her specific volumes of poetry *Spin a Soft Black Song* and *Ego-tripping: and other Poems for young people*.

Afro-American writing throws light on racism and the saga of suffering of the Black race. And the impact of this racism leads to inferiority complexes. While adults are shattered young children are gripped by all sorts of phobias. Boards that relegate favours and preferences for whites can be detrimental deterrents for children. In the poem "Some things are funny like that" Giovanni describes how a young boy goes to play in a school yard and is ticked of because of colour. "And he said LITTLE BOY THIS PLAY /GROUND IS FOR BLACK CHILDREN / (*Spin a Soft Black Song* 23). This kind of compartmentalization does no good to the other wise bewildered child. History even indicates how Black slaves were kept for the sole purpose to breed more children. Illegitimate or legitimate young Black children of America know they have descended from slaves. They have been "othered" by ethnocentrism and racism.

Blacks are human beings who survive a dehumanizing plight. Their history is a paradigm of human triumph. Awakening national consciousness is a way of decolonizing. And for this, writers like Nikki Giovanni write poems that catch the conscience of young Black children. Giovanni is an ardent supporter of the idea "Black love is black wealth"

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(*Ego-tripping* 17). Appreciating the characteristics of one's race, be it social or cultural, is a positive step. Giovanni's pride in her Blackness is revealed in "Poem for My nephew":

i wish i were  
 a shadow  
 oh wow when they put  
 the light on  
 me I'd grow longer and taller and  
 BLACKER

(*Spin a Soft Black Song* 13)

Giovanni uses certain unusual comparisons to reveal her creative yet appropriate diction and syntax to make Black children proud of their Blackness. She describes a Black mother's fondness for her infant by calling him "come on chocolate drop" (*Spin a Soft Black Song* 7).

Giovanni's works are to a great extent autobiographical, and reflect her deep love for ancestry, the travails of her slave ancestors and pride in heritage. Poems like "Nikki-Rosa" and "Ego Tripping" are autobiographical – they reflect her past. "Nikki-Rosa" is Giovanni's signature poem in which she describes:

Childhood remembrances are always a drag  
 If you're Black  
 You always remember things like living in Woodlawn  
 With no inside toilet

(*Ego-tripping* 16)

In this autobiographical poem, both poet and propagandist ensure that Black love and Black happiness are a memoir and manifesto. In her exposition she moves on to being confessional. In the poem "Ego Tripping" she is confessional and self explanatory:

I was born in the Congo  
 I walked the fertile crescent and built  
 The sphinx  
 I designed a pyramid so tough that a star

(*Ego-tripping* 3)

Confiding in her young readers she reveals her pride in her race enkindling in them similar feelings.

Giovanni promotes love and humanism as important especially among children.

Since the mind is a clean slate constant reprimands and humiliation can only crush the child if he is deprived of acceptance and love. In the poem "If" she says that, if children, "lived in a civilized world / he'd learn that all is love" (*Spin a Soft Black Song* 57). But American multicultural society reveals mainly racism and ethnocentrism to a Black onlooker child. And only exposure to peaceful coexistence and harmony can make the child want to live in this beautiful universe. But to their great misfortune Black children were/are born in racist white America. So being socially committed Giovanni feels it is up to writers like her to build up the morale of her people for which she starts with young children.

Giovanni knows that the psyche of the child can be deterred by deterrents like othering from having a healthy attitude to life. She fears that children can be affected by feelings of insecurity and instability. She brightens up their minds with her unique streak of independence encouraging them to have a mind of their own. It is up to them to drum their own beat and to make others sit up to notice them. In the poem "the Drum" she describes the world as a drum. She says:

a drum tight and hard  
and I told him  
I'm gonna beat  
out my own rhythm

(*Spin a soft Black Song* 41)

Giovanni awakens Black consciousness. It is this streak of independence and assertion that helps her to arouse the Black people to fight ethnocentrism and instill in the minds of young black children that "double consciousness" (Dubois 16) has created inferiority complexes in them. She says in "The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro":

Can you kill  
Can you kill a white man  
Can you kill the nigger  
In you

(*Black Feeling Black Talk* 20)

If they stop seeing themselves through the eyes of the white man they will find within them their worth and tap their talents uninhibited.

Giovanni encourages children to learn to live accepting failures and in harmony with others for a peaceful tomorrow. Her idealism and hope are the bed rock of her children's poems. She believes a "beautiful loving world is possible" so she makes a frontal attack on the myth white is not right. Giovanni wants to help Black children to feel positive about their racial identity, and not to long to be white. Her poetry reflects the ideas of the Black Arts Movement, which believed that "Black is Beautiful." In her signature poem "nikki

rosa” she says: “and I really hope no white person ever has cause / to write about me / because they never understand (*Ego-tripping* 16). While white mainstream Americans depict Black Americans in certain stereotyped ways Giovanni through her poems resists this representation. There is no need for the mainstream Americans to define Blacks. She says: “I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so unreal / I cannot be comprehended / except by my permission (“Ego-tripping”5). These lines encourage Black children to be their own unique selves or different but not to get way laid by white America. She reminds them that if only Black Americans speak there could be absolute truth in their individual experience.

Giovanni reconstructs the Black child’s image of himself by celebrating Blackness. Giovanni celebrates Blackness as part and parcel of her identity. It is her colour and physical characteristics that make her stand out, racially apart from the mainstream like the rest of her community. In “Revolutionary Dreams she says:

i used to dream militant dreams  
 dreams of taking  
 over america to show  
 these white folks how it should be  
 done

(*Ego-tripping* 28)

Giovanni instills in young Black minds that they should be trend setters and role models for the mainstream Americans.

Side-stepping both nostalgia and condescension she exhibits the experience of life of the Black children. By relating poetry, music and art this message is communicated more effectively. American racism made her write herself back to the centre. She asserts her “american Black” identity and resists erasure. She writes as a radical writing herself into the canon of subalterns.

Family is the back bone of society. Giovanni advocates the need for a family, the need for children to grow up in a loving and peaceful family atmosphere she finds essential for the balanced development of a child. But with the rise of broken homes and single parents, Giovanni emphasizes the need for children to feel loved and wanted. She has written poems that speak of parents love for their children, and how Black women suffer hardships to rear their children. This can be illustrated with an example in the poem “mummies do”:

In summer  
 mummies go to work and locks  
 me in  
 [.....]

and I ask mommy why can't i  
go out and mommy says because  
she loves me.

(Spin a soft Black song 15)

She focuses on the necessity of spending time with one's children and to build up a strong and deep relationship with them. Giovanni strongly supports family relationships. Family is a back bone to society. It frames one's outlook and reconstructs the image of the child. The sense of responsibility for one's loved ones must be felt. She was willing to go back and look after her family. On one occasion when she had moved closer to her work place she had to move back home since her father Gus had a stroke. She says: "People in their kindness want to say what a wonderful thing I did to give up my home and independence to go back to my parents' home, but the wonderful thing for me was that two people I have known and loved needed me and I needed them" (*The Prosaic Soul Of Nikki Giovanni* 496).

Giovanni makes use of several techniques to capture the minds and hearts of children to communicate her message like a sugar coated pill. Illustrations, is one of them. The compelling drawings of George Ford in *Ego-Tripping* and the illustrations by George Martin exhibit a combination of effective conceptualisation of the theme and representing it through visual media. These illustrations complement the experiences of Afro-American children effectively.

Black oral tradition is something Giovanni adopts in her poetry. Her written and public readings are accompanied by pauses and breaks as part of the Black oral tradition. She maintains the rhythm and beat which is also part of the oral tradition. Through her poems she spreads pride in one's Blackness, preserving her Black heritage by making known to children their Black oral tradition. Her poetry reading sessions are musical, dramatic, energizing, enlightening and gripping. Her choice of words whether written or read aloud has a sonorous quality to it and there is a rhythmic pattern, which creates an unconscious body movement. Margaret B. McDowell in "Groundwork for a More Comprehensive Criticism of Nikki Giovanni" says that "like a folk singer she senses the close relationship of poetry with music, since her poetry, like music depends on sound and rhythm and is incomplete without oral performance and without an audience" (186). The staccato style of Black writing is a clear example.

While transferring from the oral to the written there is a certain style and rhythmic beat which is also transferred. While reading the poems of Giovanni the rhythms and the beat are not lost. Giovanni has also been reading her poems aloud to her audiences. Through the staccato style, which sounds like the beating of a drum she reveals her African cultural past, which cannot be erased, even in these modern times. Her poems in English reflect her African sentiments and pride of Black heritage. Often her writing becomes speech like, a reminder of the Black Oral tradition. Giovanni says:

i wanta say just gotta say something

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bout those beautiful beautiful beautiful outasight  
 black men  
 with they afros  
 walking down the street  
 is the same ol danger  
 but a brand new pleasure

(*Ego-tripping* 25)

She gives emphasis on orality and the sound of language. For this sound pattern and rhythm her poems have given her considerable attention. Giovanni writes in the street chant commonly utilized in the 1960s Black Arts Movement. This style of writing and reading makes her popular among children.

Black English power comes from its tradition and oral language structure. Giovanni says: "Black people come from an oral tradition, we sat by the fire and told tales; we tended flocks and rapped poems. We had a beginning and an end for we didn't know what tomorrow would bring" (*Prosaic* 120).

Giovanni reads her poems in public throughout the length and breadth of the country. Her friend and colleague Virginia Fowler says: "In her poetry Giovanni attempts to continue African and African-American oral traditions, and she seems in many ways to have less reverence for the written word than for the spoken" (*Collected Poetry* xxi). She goes on to add that: "As a poet she equates the survival of her people with their ability to use the only thing left them, their "human voice" (*Collected Poetry* xxiii).

Writers of ethnic identity know that they can transform American culture through their writings. Each of these writers is creating a language that is "American language" and reflecting their own regional or racial accents. So in a way they are creating something new, but at the same time it is still "the American language", pushed further. These are trying to be part of the American literary canon. They are creating American literature but expressing indigenous thoughts. She creates a new English with racial accents. She tries to bring about a global culture. Fanon says, "The colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 187). She writes in the borrowed language of the colonized but leaves her cultural hallmark through certain techniques like – rhythm, phraseology and spellings.

Moving from the periphery to the centre she appropriates the English language. She preserves her cultural heritage by turning America into yet another aspect of her own culture. Thus inarticulate silences are voiced through English and heard. Giovanni constructs her own word order which is opposed to the mainstream rules. She makes use of typical Black colloquial usage like in the poem "Beautiful black Men" in *Ego-tripping*



"i wanta say just gotta say something" (25). In the "kidnap poem" in the same collections she says "show you off to mama/yeah if i were a poet i'd kid/nap you" (*Ego-tripping* 1). Risking intelligibility she persists in using the black phraseology to establish an ethnic identity. In yet another poem "Communication" she says "I'm gonna grab your love" (*Ego-tripping* 35). In the "Kidnap poem" she describes how a poet would kidnap a person in words "if I were a poet/I'd kidnap you/put you in my phrases and meter (*Ego Tripping* 1). She makes use of typical Afro-American vocabulary - gonna, wanna, cha cha cha, whittie which are all colloquial expressions. Giovanni by flouting the rules of language, and even of punctuation writes with a dissenting note.

Like Giovanni, Afro-American writers wish to become their own image-makers. In the "poem for black boys" she remarks in an inspiring fashion saying: "where are you're heroes, my little Black ones / [.. .] This is a game you can win" (*Ego-tripping* 11). Black poetry reveals a rediscovery and evaluation of Black folk values, the elevation of members of Black masses, the introduction and validation of the blues, jazz, ballads, sermons and Black idiom as poetic material. In "the geni in the jar" she says: "sing a black song our black song / from the black loom" (*Ego-tripping* 31).

Cultural encounters leads to the manifestation of ethnicity consciously and unconsciously. But when this is suppressed in a child because of othering then it requires socially committed writers like Giovanni to reconstruct it as early as possible in Afro-American children so that they grow up loving their Blackness celebrating it and manifesting it, proudly asserting and making their way up centre.

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