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The Cultural confrontation in Sonia Sanchez's Rap Poetry

A B S T R A C T

This paper studies the rap poetry of Sonia Sanchez as an example of the literature of protest which prevailed throughout the 1960s and '70s of the twentieth century, especially the poetry of the Black Arts Movement. During the 1960s a group of Black poets started to compose poems that can best be described as anti-white poems which aimed at rejecting the hegemonic white culture and its oppressions over the Blacks. They rejected the American culture in favour of a Black one that would formulate a Black consciousness which would be the touchstone of the cultural resistance and would, the poets wished, initiate a revolution against the white Americans' violence and unfair practices towards the African-Americans.

Sonia Sanchez was an active member of the Black Arts Movement which was established in the 1960s and called for a violent revolution against the white Americans, especially after the assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. This movement called for Black aesthetic which highlighted a literature that reflects and explores the Black culture and traditions and speaks to the Blacks' issues and concerns. Therefore, their poems were politically oriented as they addressed the lives and ambitions of the Black people and started using the Black speech in their poetry. Their poetry, then, is given a Black identity which is considered as the essence of the Black Aesthetic Movement© 2022 JTUH, College of Education for Human Sciences, Tikrit University

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المواجهة الحضارية في شعر الراب لسونيا سانشيز

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الخلاصة:

يتناول هذا البحث دراسة شعر الراب لسونيا سانشيز كنموذج لأدب المقاومة الذي ساد خلال فترة الستينيات والسبعينيات من القرن الماضي. حيث بدأ مجموعة من الشعراء من ذوي البشرة السوداء بكتابة قصائدهم التي يمكن ان توصف بانها موجهة ضد البيض والتي سعت الى رفض ثقافة البيض المهيمنة والظلم الذي مارسه ضد السود. وقد رفض هؤلاء الشعراء الثقافة الامريكية من أجل ثقافة تتغنى بذوي البشرة السوداء

والتي من المؤمل ان تنمي وعي بتلك الثقافة والتي سوف تكون الحجر الاساس في المقاومة الثقافية والتي سوف تنشأ، كم يأمل الشعراء، ثورة ضد ثقافة العنف الامريكية وممارساتها غير العادلة تجاه السود. تعتبر سونيا سانشيز عضوا فعالا في حركة الفنون لذوي البشرة السوداء والتي تأسست في فترة الستينات من القرن العشرين والتي نادى لثورة عنيفة لمواجهة عنف الامريكان البيض، خصوصا بعد اغتيال مالكوم أكس ومارتن لوثر كنج. كما دعت هذه الحركة لتأسيس الحركة الجمالية لذوي البشرة السوداء والتي أكدت على الأدب الذي يعكس ويكتشف ثقافة وتقاليد ذوي البشرة السوداء ويهتم بقضاياهم وأهتماماتهم. ولذلك فانها تعتبر حركة موجهة سياسيا وجوهر الحركة الجمالية للسود.

I. Introduction

Sanchez belongs to the time in which the Black Arts Movement or Black Aesthetic emerged in the late 1960s. The period in which famous poets such as Amiri Baraka, June Jordan, Niki Giovanni, Audre Lords and others produced their poetry. This period witnessed a variety of reactionary movements whether in literature, politics, or the social and cultural norms that prevailed in the States during the 1960s and well into the 1970s. The 1960s witnessed great social and political commotions, especially concerning Black people and their strife for their civil rights and rejection of the racial discrimination demonstrated by the American government and legislators. Black people started protesting, demonstrating and marching the streets of big cities demanding their rights and resisting the hegemony of white American people and culture. Many Black people were killed with their leaders and spokesmen, like, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and others.

II. The Black Arts Movement

Out of this political and social turbulence, the Black Arts Movement emerged. It was radically different from the other Black American movements that preceded it in that it did not seek for a common ground with the White American culture and politics, but emphasizes a purely Black culture in which the fact of one's blackness is the essence of his supremacy. *"The Black poets of the 1960s emphasized the uniqueness of the black man's history. They stressed the black community's need to repudiate the malign influence of the Euro-American literary, political and social estrangements."* (Abd-ur-Rahman, 22) These Black poets, in effect of the Black Aesthetic Movement and its theories of Black supremacy, attempted to promote a

kind of collective consciousness among the Black people to fight back the racial violence and oppression not through the peaceful ways of Malcolm X and King, but through the same violent ways of their oppressors. This is the reason behind their accusation of “*not only adopting but also promoting a philosophy of violence and hatred towards White America*”(Abd-ur-Rahman, 22)

III. The Hip Hop Culture and Rap Poetry

The sixties were also the great age of the hip hop culture and its literary forms especially the rap poetry and the jazz music. The hip hop is mainly a culture of resistance and opposition with its breathless outflow of ideas supporting the Black people and their culture. It is an important part of the African American cultural history as it managed to express the suffering of the Black people in the poor cities and the ghettos. It reinforced, through the performed word, a “*black collective consciousness*” which was an essential principle of the Black Arts Movement as it helped constructing an African American culture that focused on the fact of the blackness of its people. Grassian describes the hip hop as follows:

Hip hop culture is based in part on the desire to create an artistic expression of rage. It is conceived and conducted by a group of young Americans rebelling against their marginalization, their invisibility and the social violence practiced by the American white culture. (10)

One of the natural consequences of the hip hop culture is the rap poetry. Alex Pate defines rap poetry as “*poetry that emanates from the cultural reality of hip hop. The consciousness that reverberates from hip hop’s core creates the environment in which this poetry occurs.*” In other words, “*rap poetry derives its definition from hip hop culture*” (Pate, 23). Hip hop, as a cultural reality following the Black Arts Movement, continued to adopt an oppositional stance toward everything and anything which reflected the world that dominated its proponents. Although hip hop was born from any number of cultural, social, and economic factors that were present at the time, underlying all of them was the existence of an instinctive and shrewd desire on the part of poor Black or Latino boys to express themselves. In so

doing, they embarked on a deeper journey, namely to “*reorder a world in which they were unlikely to succeed, in such a way that their liabilities and vulnerabilities could be transformed into valuable commodities*” (Pate, 26).

Perhaps the most important idea embodied by the language of the rap, and the language of African American literature in general, is that it can reflect an oppositional position. Words spoken can oppose existing ideas and supplant them with new ones. Perhaps even more significantly, rap poets discovered that the speaker has the power. If the speaker then is given access to thousands of people who are lured by a magnetic beat, this power that comes from self-expression can be multiplied exponentially.

The unpredictable nature of the consequences of the hip hop and its worldwide spread was basically due to the subject matters that its rap poetry tackled. Rap poetry focused on the themes of poverty, the absence of justice, the oppression demonstrated by the governments, the lack of civil rights and the absence of any hope of a better future. These themes touched the feelings and misery of so many people around the world and were the main cause of the prevalence of the hip hop culture and its rap manifestation. The poor, traumatized longed for a way of self-expression, a way of articulating their sufferings and making it audible to the people of authority. The majority of these people were not Black, but they were attracted to rap poetry because of its oppositional and resistant nature; it becomes the voice for the voiceless, a way of revolutionary expressions of protest and rejection. In the 1960s, the hip hop culture and its different manifestations become the voice of the Black Power Movement which called for a violent reaction against the assassinations of Malcolm X, King, and so many other Black people.

This fact clarifies the objectives behind Sanchez’s choice of rap poetry as the main poetic form of her early volumes of poetry. “Her writings signify upon shared patterns of language use and textual forms that are the bases of Black American literary tradition. In the case of Sanchez’s writing, she engages hip hop style and the black vernacular to deal with issues affecting the diverse groups with which she affiliates” (Gabbins, 46). She extends the definition of “black” to dialogue with the shared experiences of young people, specifically women of color, who struggle against discrimination, objectification, violence, and poverty in the American metropolis. The style and content of her work, then, will be examined in terms of

its connections to the American black vernacular, black American literary texts, and hip hop culture.

The rap poetry, furthermore, is a reflection of the black communities and their experiences in the US. For this reason Pate identifies “saturation” (44) as one of the most important elements of rap poetry. Stephen Henderson emphasizes the use of the term “saturation” as he was trying to “measure the degree of ‘blackness’ in a poem as a way of privileging the uniqueness of the African American poet” (67).

Furthermore, he overvalued the poetry of the Black poets who celebrated and glorified the Black culture and its people. He also “sought to value those black poets who had chosen to write from the black experience for black readers. He clearly believed that there was a profound distinction in the tone and tenor of the African American poetic voice that was immutable and perhaps beyond imitation.” (Henderson, 71) This is not to mean that other ethnic, or multicultural poets, are not able to use it, for saturation, though based in the fact of its blackness, is a reflection of the hip hop culture. The hip hop culture, according to Pate, “is one that is politically oppositional to an imagined dominant majority (read white), overtly racialized (African American), overtly gendered, competitive, egalitarian, urban , and global (multicultural)” (87). Finally rap poetry is one of literary forms that cares for the social class of its poets and performers and this is due to the nature of the reading public of this kind of poetry and also the subject matter that it tackles. “Rap poets are expected to have been raised in the inner city, like Brooklyn. They are expected to know the streets, recognize both the beauty and oppression of black urban life, and understand gangs and drug culture even if their poems are not about such things”.(Pate, 56)

IV. Sonia Sanchez’s Rap Poetry

Sonia Sanchez wrote her poetry, especially the early volumes, from the perspectives of the hip hop culture. She emphasizes the fact that unless African Americans regain “a sense of their own Blackness, unless they begin to love themselves and embrace their Blackness...the impending Black revolution of the mind will never translate into a Black nationalist revolution” (Marcoux, 225)

Sonia Sanchez was born in September, 1934 in Birlington, Alabama. She would grow from there to be a poet, a playwright, essayist and educator. She

became a feminist and had a very important role in the Black Rights Movement during the 1960s.

Sanchez's early work responds to political and personal upheavals of the 1960s with radical experiments in form, style, and theme. "Assassin poems...poems that kill" (Lawrence, 65) , as Amiri Baraka calls them, dominate Sanchez's *Homecoming* (1969) and *We a BaddDDD People* (1970). The first volume of poetry of Sonia Sanchez is "a pledge of allegiance to Blackness, to black love, to black heroes and her own realization as a woman, an artist and a revolutionary". (Gabbin, 181) Being an active member of the Blacks' Movement, she realizes the need for unifying the Black people and urging them to start acting back as a community and not mere individuals. Her "Assassin poems" are directed towards the younger generation of her people, those who are capable of acting and using violence against the oppressions of the white people. These poems are full of rage, hatred and anger. Lynda Koolish maintains that "the poems anger is reflected in aggressive typography: a mix of all capitals and all lowercase words, studded with frequent diagonal slashes, words strung together to suggest a correlation between the economic greed of white corporations and black street hustlers." (24)

In her essay "The Blue/Black Poetics of Sonia Sanchez," Regina B. Jennings provides a list of Sanchez's thematic concerns as she believes that Sanchez's poetic personas are "diverse, incorporating themes from China to Nicaragua, to Africa" (qtd. In Cuncinella, 319). These thematic concerns include a return to and an understanding of Blackness or the Black identity. This return to Black identity is a "home-coming". This identity is segregated in a white-oriented society. She says in the poem "Homecoming":

I have been a
Way so long
Once so long
I returned tourist
Style to watch all
The niggers kill
Themselves...

I have returned
Leaving behind me
And those hide and
Seek faces peeling
With Freudian dreams

This is for real.

Black

Niggers

My beauty. (HC, 3, 1-16)

The sense of “black is beautiful” is one of the important notions that Sanchez wants to implement in the collective consciousness of the Black People. It embodies a kind of a communal realization of self-pride and high self-esteem which is the cornerstone of building the Black Nationalism that she, along with her colleagues at the Black Arts Movement, aspires to achieve. She rejects the sense of inferiority that prevailed in the previous centuries in which the Blacks were subsidiary to the white Americans who used only to complain the oppression of a cruel master, but now it is time to act as equal, powerful and beautiful. Such kind of change should start from within the Black community, by “coming home” to embrace their race and purify it from the assimilationists and peace callers. In her poem “there are blk/puritans,” Sanchez accuses some of her black fellows of being assimilationists and helpers of the white Americans in oppressing her people:

There
Are blk/ puritans among us
Who must be told that
WITE / AMERICA
Is the
Original sin (WABP, 17, 21-26)

Sanchez believes that the orientation to Blackness should start early. Children should be taught to redefine things to reach the truth which had been veiled by white teachers. She believes that the construction of a black culture should start from building an independent black identity that is capable of confronting the white American culture which marginalizes them. Addison Gayle affirms that “the serious black artist of today is at war with American society” (Andrews, 7) this war should start early in the lives of the African American children by implanting such a collective black culture. In her poem “in definition for blk/children,” she redefines a policeman to a black girl:

A policeman is

A pig

And he shld be in

A zoo...

Until he stops

Killing blk/people (WABP, 12, 1-6)

The poet here is consciously stripping the policeman of his humanity by describing him as a pig due to his violent behavior to the Black people. His savageness transformed him to a killing animal and he would still be an animal until he stops killing Black people. The violence that seems from these lines is directed against the hegemony of a culture that used to oppress them for centuries and now it is time to react in the same manner.

In Sanchez’s “Assassin poems” she murders “wite americans”, cops, sanctimonious Black puritans and assimilationists. A threatening tone prevails throughout these poems with the utmost feelings of rage and anger. In these poems she rejected the peaceful manner of Malcolm X and King and starts urging the Black people to act violently, asking them to stop playing the role of the victim and try, even for one time, to be the victimizer. In her poem “for unborn malcolms”, she expresses her anger towards injustice; warning the “wite”:

the next time he kills one

of our
blk/princes
some of his faggots
gonna die
....an eye for an eye
a tooth for a tooth.
us blk
niggers
are out to lunch
and the main course
is gonna be
white meat. (WABP, 13, 1-13)

From the title of the poem one can sense Sonia's predictions of a line of Malcolms to appear. Those Black unborn Malcolms are supposed to replace the one assassinated by the white people, nevertheless, it also means that these unborn generations will face the same destiny as that of Malcolm X if Black people did not start violent revolution now. The tone of the poem is very sharp, stuffed with rage, anger, life threats and a self-determination to take revenge against the assassination of Malcolm X. Sanchez's protest in this poem against the racism of white America is part of the Black Arts Movements endeavors at stripping off the socio-political determination of the American government to keep the Blacks in subjugation. Indeed the 1960s witnessed the assassination of two great leaders of the Black community: Malcolm X in 1965, and Martin Luther King Jr., in 1968. These crimes initiated demonstrations, sit-ins, marching through the cities all over the States, protesting against the violence of the government and its racial violence.

Sanchez then focuses on correcting the stereotypes of the Black people such as the "nigger". This word is a racially-charged word which is used to offend African Americans. It is generally considered by the Black people to be insulting, offensive, racial, and a way of setting them as the other who is devoid of an

identity. This word is used to replace their names and replace them with a focus on their physical and facial markers which are the essential elements for stereotyping them. By making them the “other”, they are, then, stripped of any rights as human beings, but they are simply “niggers”. Sanchez wants to culturally confront the associations of this word by making it a mark of manhood and pride.

“Nigger” is, then, a poem which changes the offensive racial meaning of the word “nigger” to be a new word of a new meaning of self-esteem and pride:

Look./my man. I’ll/

Say it slow for you.

N-I-G-G-E-R.

That don’t turn me a man

I know I am. (WABP, 15, 1-5)

In this redefinition of the word “nigger”, “Sanchez hopes to make a difference in the way black people perceive themselves and the way they are perceived by white America.” (Jennings, 238)

Sanchez does not use themes only to return to her black identity, but she uses language also. She uses the black speech to underscore her home coming. Evans asserts that “the act of returning home as a rejection of fantasy and an acceptance of involvement” (432). This involvement demands a “return to blackness, a rejection of white values. It also includes a return to black speech and rhythms, idioms, and music.” (Andrews, 336)

The music in Sanchez poems is due to the influence of the hip hop culture and the jazz music upon her poetry. She uses small letters, separate words, terse statements, implicit ironies, space and typography. She even changes the spelling, split letters and words, and writes her poems in the Black dialect. She uses words like “wite Amurica, sistuhs, brothas” among so many other Black dialect words. In her poem “to chuck” Sanchez destroys the rules of writing in correct English as part of her expressions that the white American system as reflected in society, politics and morality should be destroyed and replaced by another system which shows fair treatment to Black people:

i'm gonna write me

a poem like

e.e.

cum

mings to

day. a

bout you

mov

ing iNsID

me

I'

m

go nn (WABP, 23, 1-13)

In adopting these poetic elements in writing her poetry, Sanchez establishes herself as an important and primary figure in the construction of the new Black poetry of the 1960s with innovations of her own. She helps in establishing an innovative black literature. In her use of the black language, Sanchez protests against the white society and its culture. “she refuses to use the language of the oppressor”(Robinson,19) and instead strives to find her own language which celebrates the fact of her blackness and she manages to, in Madhubuti's words, “take black speech and put it in the context of world literature”(421).

Sanchez's language may be offensive to readers and listeners as it contains, sometimes, sexually explicit images and racial epithets and obscene words. In his introduction to ***We a BaddDDD People***, Dudley Randall writes of her:

This tiny woman with the infants face attacks the demons

Of this world with the fury of a sparrow defending her

*Fledglings in the nest. She hurls obscenities at things
That are obscene. She writes directly, ignoring metaphors,
Similes, ambiguity, and other poetic devices. But her
Bare passionate speech can be very effective. (9)*

In her poem “blk/rhetoric” Sanchez uses the black obscene language in a fit of rage against that white people and their oppressions to the blacks:

Who’s gonna give our young
Blk/ people new heroes
(instead of catch / phrases)
(instead of cad/ill/acs)
(instead of pimps)
(instead of wite/whores)
(instead of drugs)
(instead of new dances)
(instead of chit/ter/lings)
(instead of quick/fucks in the hall/way
Of wite / america’s mind) (WABP, 16, 1-11)

The last poem of her collection ***We a BaddDDD People***, the poet gets even more furious about the time when Black people start reacting violently against the racial discrimination and oppressions of the whites. She threatens them that black community and its people are getting stronger every day and they will surely attack:

Just. Gitting. stroNNNger.

Maken warriors

Outa boys.

Blk/ woocommerce

Outa girls.

No mo tellen the man he is

A dead/die/en/motha

Fucka.

Just a sound of drums.

The sonnnnnnnNNG of chiefs

Pouren outa our blk/sections. (WABP, 48, 1-11)

The poet here is outrageous to the extent that one can feel that she is fighting and not writing a poem, and indeed this is what she aims to do, “to write poems that kill”.

V. Conclusion

Sonia Sanchez, Then, along with her friends at the Black Arts Movement, manages to express the trauma of the black people and the oppression demonstrated by the white American authority and culture. Throughout her poetry, she calls for a unified black community that is proud of its culture and heritage and celebrates the blackness of its people. Such kind of a unified consciousness would pave the way for a stronger black community that would be capable of defending itself against any unjust treatment or oppression. In her early poetry, Sanchez calls for a violent revolution against white America symbolized by authority and its cultural reflections. However, this revolution did not happen for many political reasons and most of the poets of the 1960s changed their attitudes towards using violent ways against the oppressions of white America and its racial discrimination which stripped the black people of their humanity and sets them as inferior citizens in the United States.

Nonetheless, these poets managed to create a Black culture for their community which celebrates blackness rather than feeling ashamed of it. The culture of the hip hop, jazz music and rap poetry are all the literary manifestations of the 1960s and the Black Arts Movement which reflect the truth about the lives and conditions of the Black people and their struggle for equality and human rights.

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