

Literary Analysis



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The “Poem about My Rights” by June Jordan is an insight into the world of the marginalized and oppressed people. The author argues that racism and biases associated with skin color, gender, and age still exist. Jordan uses eloquent rhetoric appeals, great writing style, and the context of current social dilemmas. The use of ethos, pathos, and logos are apparent throughout the poem.

The poem is a heartbreaking, painful monologue (or even an inner dialogue) of a woman. It is a confession of a person who feels morally and physically raped, who falls the victim of the social system with, if not racial discrimination, then, at least, the division of people by color, gender, age, and other attributes. The narrator feels chained and bound by these attributes and attitudes. She feels like she is on the cross-roads of all the world’s biases and politics that hang above her head like the sword of Damocles. She is an outcast because she is of “the wrong sex, the wrong age, the wrong skin” (Jordan). In a way, it is a crisis of identity expressed by the narrator, and the blame is reasonably shifted onto the wider context of society. After all, in a world where everyone treats you as an outcast with no rights, feelings, and value, you will feel exactly this way. The narrator tries to explain the reasoning behind her current emotional state and the poem’s reality knocks the breath out of the reader’s chest.

The problematic of this poem is complex and threefold. On the one hand, the narrator describes the horrors of her own experience, “why I can’t / go out without changing my clothes my shoes / my body posture my gender identity my age / my status as a woman” (Jordan). She feels helpless in her own body because she cannot change anything about it.

Indeed, people are perceived and judged much based on their skin color, gender and age. Young black females constitute (or constituted at the moment when the poem was written) one of the most vulnerable social groups. The narrator describes an instance of a gang rape which clearly illustrates this vulnerability,

then I consented and there was
no rape because finally you understand finally
they fucked me over because I was wrong I was
wrong again to be me being me where I was/wrong
to be who I am (Jordan).

The mentioned abstract has alliterated parts, “...and if after stab**bb**ing him if after screams if / after **b**egging the **b**astard and if even after smashing / a **h**ammer to **h**is **h**ead...” (Jordan). The alliteration of the sound “b” can give the reader the feeling of a rough struggle and desperate anger and hatred expressed by the victim toward her offender. The alliterated “h” can be associated with the sound of a hit, a muffled sound. Thus, alliteration here helps to create an atmosphere of the rape scene and associated emotions. Alliteration is a part of the auditory and kinetic imagery of the poem and its particular scene. The rape scene stands in a stark opposition to a passage where the author describes a desired feeling of solitude thinking about her dreams, “**d**isclosed by the **s**tars and the **s**ilence” (Jordan). The alliteration of “s/z” conveys the atmosphere of peace and safety. Similarly, in the extract, “I can’t do **w**hat I **w**ant to do **w**ith my **o**wn”, the reader may feel the association with the question “why” in this assonance (Jordan). There is one more piece with an eloquent all “I am the **h**istory of the **t**errorized **i**ncarcer**a**tion” (Jordan). The repeating “r” is a symbol of terror. Considering the assonance, there is a distinctive line with this stylistic device, “**i**ndisputably **s**ingle and **s**ingular heart” (Jordan).

If taking into consideration the whole big part of the poem where rape is depicted, the reader can see that pathos is extremely strong and vivid. The narrator appeals to the reader's sympathy and understanding by providing an emotionally complicated picture of rape where the victim tries to protect herself by hitting the rapist with a hammer, but arouses only a new wave of rage and sexual aggression and consequent gang-rape. After the victim consents, helpless and powerless, she comes back mentally to the bitter and unjust idea that this all happens because of her a priori valueless status, origin, and identity. In addition, she speculates upon what should and should not, in theory, be classified as rape. Of course, it is done to show how callous the definitions and classifications of violence and crime can be. Moreover, the idea of rape persists through the whole poem and serves as an allegory or metaphor for different types of moral misdoings, be they personal or geopolitical.

In addition to personal sufferings, there is the issue of being “wrong” in a family. In the following extract, the narrator tells the reader how her father made her feel “wrong,”

it was my father saying I was wrong saying that
I should have been a boy because he wanted one/a
boy and that I should have been lighter skinned and
that I should have had straighter hair and that
I should not be so boy crazy but instead I should
just be one/a boy (Jordan).

In the passage, the narrator feels wrong for simply being born a child of the “wrong,” i.e. undesired, sex. Her father wanted a boy and, consequently, he shifted all the weight of his dissatisfaction onto the fragile shoulders of his daughter. Moreover, a reference to a lighter

skin and straighter hair expresses the father's despair about the very ethnicity of his child. The man understands that it would be much easier for his child to survive in this world if she were a white male: one of the "caste" that dominates the contemporary world. The narrator's mother induced additional "wrongs" on the child, "it was my mother pleading plastic surgery for / my nose and braces for my teeth" (Jordan). The passage suggests that the mother was obsessed with the idea of perfecting her child. She wanted a perfect look for the girl and, probably, meant for the best but, in fact, only further morally crippled the narrator. Due to the mother, the girl felt wrong in terms of her appearance. Thus, the parents contributed greatly to the current state of despair in the narrator and the feeling of being utterly wrong.

Lastly, there is a much more global problem of being born in a country that has been a perpetrator of centuries-long discrimination regarding the "black" people and, at the same time, being black in the world on a stage of historical development when racial discrimination and the legacy of slavery seem to be left in the past. She feels the wrongs of other people and other countries. The author compares what developed nations do to the developing ones by comparing these actions to rape,

...which is exactly like South Africa
penetrating into Namibia penetrating into
Angola and does that mean I mean how do you know if
Pretoria ejaculates what will the evidence look like the
proof of the monster jackboot ejaculation on Blackland
and if
after Namibia and if after Angola and if after Zimbabwe
and if after all of my kinsmen and women resist even to
self-immolation of the villages and if after that

we lose nevertheless what will the big boys say will they claim my consent (Jordan).

It feels like the author associates and identifies herself, ethnically and spiritually, with other people of her skin color that suffered or still suffer on the African continent, as well as anywhere in the world, “We are the wrong people of / the wrong skin on the wrong continent” (Jordan).

All these dimensions of “wrongs” merge to create a complex problem that makes the narrator conclude,

I have been raped
because I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age
the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the
wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic...
because the problems
turn out to be
me (Jordan).

The poem’s ethos is evident in its referring to real names and entities including the names of countries and organizations such as the C.I.A., the F.B.I., Exxon Corporation, etc. Logos in the poem is vivid through the reference to politics and intrusion of the ruling elite into the lives of plane people and peoples. Also, logos is seen in the very structure of the poem. One of the manifestations of logos is the repeated parts of the poem: the refrain. The refrain may not be absolute, and the formulation and word choice may differ in different parts of the poem, but the repeating idea is the following, “was wrong the wrong age / the wrong skin the wrong / gender identity” (Jordan). Another manifestation of logos is the sequence of narration. The story starts

with a self-analysis and self-assessment; proceeds to personal history, then national history, family history, global politics; and, finally, ends with a reassessment of the narrator's identity, and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this but I can tell you that from now on my resistance my simple and daily and nightly self-determination may very well cost you your life (Jordan).

The final verse signifies the change of perspective from that of the victim to that of someone who is ready to protect herself by any price.

In conclusion, the "Poem about My Rights" is a literary masterpiece that illuminates the issue of identity crisis on the personal, as well as social and political levels. The issue is still topical despite the global effort to stop discrimination and exploitation policies. The author shows that racism and the "wrongs" associated with it are eternal and pertain to each individual, especially people of "color."

WORK CITED

Jordan, June. "Poem about My Rights." *Poetry Foundation*. n.d. Web. 5 May 2014