

PERFORMANCE POETRY OF JEAN 'BINTA' BREEZE AND LOUISE BENNETT: POSITIONING IDENTITY

Sukanta Roy

Research Scholar, Department of English, Visva-Bharati, West Bengal, India

Received: 06 Aug 2018

Accepted: 10 Aug 2018

Published: 31 Aug 2018

ABSTRACT

Defining performance poetry is very difficult. For some critics the words in literary piece engage in an interactive response with the readers, composers and other words. This interaction is, in a way, performance. Therefore this engagement and its responses that we are calling performance happen undeniably all the time within the text. However apart from this internal textual performance and the reader response performance, if we can call it so after the reader response theory, there is this traditional view of performance that is more related to oral culture or something to do with orality of language. Performance poetry is the poetry being performed in front of an audience using language. Here it could be random or scripted, accompanied or not accompanied with music, with or without the active participation of the audience. Dub poetry which originated in Jamaica is considered to be one of the most successful forms of performance poetry.

Descending from oral cultures of Africa and influenced by reggae music initially dub poetry was inseparably associated with music or the reggae "riddms". Linton Kwesi Johnson, the most famous reggae dub poet and Bob Marley, the reggae singer, had not merely proliferated in their respective fields of poetry and songs, they also, for the first time, showed their artistic creativity to the world as the true Jamaican Art. However like many other genres of literature, in the fields of fine art or any kind of recognized art, women were thought to be not as progressive as men. This paper would try to highlight two women dub poets, Jean "Binta" Breeze and Louise Bennett, who not merely proved themselves extremely successful but also have showed how they distinguish themselves and their poetry from the already available, though recently made (because the genre is not very old) poetry, and at the same time, how they are continuously negotiating with the various layers of marginality and defining their own position in Caribbean literati and world literature.

KEYWORDS: *Performance Poetry, Dub, labrish, Creole, Third World*

INTRODUCTION

Mervyn Morris in his essay "Dub Poetry?" defines dub poetry as a performance which "incorporates a music beat, often a reggae beat. Often, but not always, the performance is done to the accompaniment of music, recorded or live." (Morris: 1) Usually, the poet appears on the stage with prepared poems but emphasizing the situation may change a bit, and perform in front of the audience, sometimes using moving body gestures and sometimes standing still. Linton Kwesi Johnson prefers, most of the time, reggae music and sometimes other types of music like Minto or Calypso

to accompany him in the performance.

Originating in Jamaica dub poetry talks about the experiences of black people, their slavery, poverty, how they were and still continuously are being exploited directly and indirectly by the Europeans, Americans or in general term Westerners. However, it also talks about the protest they have made and they are continuously making against it. The first 'recorded' dub poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson "Dread beat an' Blood" talks about how the life of an ordinary Jamaican person or rather 'man' in the early twentieth century is dreadful because of inequality, unemployment and all the legacies of colonialism. It says that the unemployed youth are wasting away by the frustration of being helpless to improve their situation and therefore takes ganja and other drugs to feel high. Darkness has really covered the island. The most interesting part of this poem is that it not merely talks about the hardship of life but also the blackness, the color of the skin, the cause of initial separation. But these have remained no longer the weakness for them. Rather the anger has risen to create a fire. The earlier pulsing fire of drugs has changed into a fire that can burn all kinds of a yoke that mankind has ever faced. Performance poetry is thus a live, interactive and engaging activity with revolutionary spirit and at the same time having the celebration of aesthetic beauty of art.

Jean "Binta" Breeze, however, prefers performance without music though she too has published albums with music along with Linton Kwesi Johnson. The most significant aspect of her poetry is that she shares the experiences of a woman in the same poverty stricken third world which from time to time, not only has been subjected to slavery and colonization but also been robbed making them suffer and remain poor. In the poem "Third World Girl" and in many other poems like "Anthem for Black Britain", "Anarchy", "Dreamtime", "Aforo mama yamakoi" she shows the harsh reality of how the British had played the dirty trick of keeping the colonized subjects naïve and uneducated so that the game of 'self' versus 'other', 'superior' versus 'inferior' could be played with them. Slavery is always a forceful, physically abusive and heinous crime. People are uprooted from their native place and thrown to a strange place only to be tortured, killed and used for the benefit of the white people. Thousands of people were taken to the ships to be brought to the New World but most of them died during the long journey through the Middle Passage. This actually helped the slave traders because by that 'process' the best and strong black person was selected by the rule of natural survival of the fittest.

Run run run

The slavers a come

Tumbling through the forest

Jumping over stones

Caught in the vines

That tie me like ropes

I cannot escape the white hand

That reaches into my home

("Aforo mama yamakoi", Breeze: 175)

The strong man or woman was good for their colonizers' plantation work or other works of slavery but the problem is that they are very strong, fearless and people having no more things to lose in that strange new world.

So they were needed to be tamed not merely by means of force but by the intellect. They were continuously told that they were inferior and as a proof of what the white people projected the argument that the color black is the symbol of evil and all the bad things in the world, therefore white would be the symbol of purity and all the goodness in the world.

I'm a third world girl
when brought me to your world
you **SAID** you educated me
you **SAID** I brought no traditions, no history
no culture, no religion, no language with me
(“Third World Girl”, Breeze: 141) (emphasis mine)

The third world man or the woman is never a grown-up person but rather always a child. This is why it is always “you said” which means the colonizers or the slave masters never allowed the marginalized one to say anything. However, the denial of subjectivity can work to a certain level but when the natural talent is smartly visible one cannot but accept it though with reluctance. Among the many qualities, they have accepted that the African descendants can “sing and dance”. However, they always have wanted them “to stay child/ wide-eyed and sometimes wild/ but always weak emotionally”, because that is the best condition to govern a set of people. The naivety of that child is the result of the attitude of many Western white thinkers and philosophers towards the people of African descendant in the New World. David Hume in a footnote of his essay “Of National Character” comments:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general, all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites....

Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men...In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning [Francis Williams]; but 'tis likely he is admired for every slander accomplishment, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. (Gates: xxxviii)

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant Wrote:

The negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling... The blacks are very vain but in the Negro's way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings. (Gates: xxxviii-xxxix)

This is the process of systematic dehumanization to make the maximum profit out of the institution called slavery. This attitude of every kind of rejection lurks over the arena of the literary world. This problem of lack of literary criticism and literary recognition has been a serious problem until very recently when the world has started to show some interests towards Caribbean literary activities. Yet the general conception of the Caribbean is that is a place of a coconut tree and a tourist place. This image of the Caribbean, which is romantic, is actually extremely derogatory and faulty. Jean “Binta” Breeze accuses the Westerners to take the Caribbean land as their favorite exotic destination. It reduces the Islands and their indigenous culture to a joke and it's naturally and the culturally rich environment is being threatened by the bureaucratic capitalist Western culture. The beautiful “paradise is merely (their) hotel”(142) and the third world girl is merely “the hairy jungle” girl. (142) This same poem talks more about the condition of women who were taken from

Africa and made into slaves and then bought by the slave owner and kept as housekeeper, worker, substitute wife and so many odd jobs they were subjected to. Yet they were never seen as proper human being let alone to be considered as equal.

Jean “Binta” Breeze and Louise Bennett both preferred performance over print poetry yet both poets eventually did publish their poems. Performance is more like a theatre where the direct interaction between the poet and the audience has a greater possibility of intimacy and therefore more effective. Louise Bennett, who is better known in the performance world as Miss Lou, uses dramatic monologue which brings the audience to a greater intimacy with the narrative. However, not merely the dramatic monologue but the very essence of Jamaican life, the talking, shouting or the overall carnivalesque spirit together create an intimacy even on stage. In the poem, “Excitement” Bennett wonders that the Caribbean people do not need entertainment like cinema because their own life is so full of events and excitement.

Susie, yuh grab de fryin-pan!

Jane, tek dis junk-a-brick

May, pahn de scrubbin-board! Me got

A cocoomacca stick!

What a braveness, eeh Miss Mattie!

What a greatness, eeh Mas Joe!

Dem shoulda mek a big glass-case

An put dat man pon a show!

Is what Jamaica people wase time

Go a movies fa

When dem got nuff free excitement

Outa street side yah?

(“Excitement”, Bennett: 34-35)

Louise Bennett’s poems are delivered loud, fast and having excessive emotion in Jamaican Creole language. She is humorous in her scathing attack against the barbarity done by the British or the white people in general. In a performance, the two most important things are language and body movement which complement each other. In a BBC radio program, she says that if the English language which is derived from Greek, Latin or Germanic languages can be considered as a complete and proper language, then Jamaican Patwa which is derived from English should also be recognized as a complete language. She further says that it is a truly new culture and new language because of its interesting origin. For her language is created out of culture and when Asian culture, European culture work upon African culture in the Caribbean people. They stir them and blend them to create a new language. And this new language they have been speaking for at least three hundred years. Therefore the new language created and reshaped in this new place must be a recognized as a language of national importance. It is said time and again that she represents true Jamaican culture and language.

Though there are challenges of taking Creole as the serious language of poetry she continued to perform, write and publish in that language. It is very interesting to note that the issues that are made to criticize the Creole have been used by her to mock then and finally and triumphantly show true Jamaican identity. Kamu Brathwaite in his essay "History of the Voice" says that the slaveholders and masters who are from various linguistic backgrounds did not want their slaves to speak their African languages for fear of mutiny. So while trying to copy the master variable language they made the hotchpotch of the language and created the Creole language. Considering the power relation between slave and the masters this is a strategic survival policy. The language is hybrid and having African essence and at the same time not completely understood by the outsider of this language. Denise deCaires Narain writes in his essay "The lure of the folk: Louise Bennett and the politics of Creole" the importance of this hybrid language to promote the nationalistic spirit:

It is easy to see, given this history, why Creole language, per se, should function as such a powerful signifier of a spirit of resistance and survivalism... [This is] the impetus for a break with colonial culture and the development of an 'indigenous' culture and language ... (Narain: 66)

While the language serves as the greatest tool for a national identity the problem arises as to that how much the language qualifies as the container of the greatest and refined art called poetry. Though Rex Nettleford in the "Introduction" of the Louise Bennett's *Jamaica Labrish* considers that the Creole is not refined enough but crude, Bennett seems to have used it wisely to make it perfect for poetry. However, the poet herself does not think so and writes that it is more liberating because it is "a manner of speaking unhampered by the rules of (Standard English) grammar, a free expression – a dialect." (Nettleford: 9) This in turn, is a political stance more related to the empowerment of women. The age-long notions by which women were kept neglected and associated with were that they speak a lot, they chatter, gossip, tell unimportant things, they quarrel too loudly. Therefore these are the things associated with women and 'womanly behavior'. However some of the French Feminists tried to 'read' those behaviors not as weaknesses of women but rather strong points. They talk about the "notions of excess, or plentitude, in which the 'chaos' is associated with woman's voice and body signals transgressively multiple possibilities for 'textual empowerment.'" (Narain 90) It suggests that women have been suppressed for long and are less involved in the important decision making works in this patriarchal world and therefore women talk to breach the gap. The gossip and chatter which seem to be unimportant actually is more preferable where people want communal harmony and collective happiness. By sharing stories and talking they become the social communicators which this western world had never experienced. In the glossary of *Jamaica Labrish*, Rex Nettleford defines the word 'labrish' as gossip and chatter, or in a word, Bennett wants to convey the message in this book *Jamaica Labrish* that 'Jamaica talks'. Westerners and other idealists who are basically Western-based thinkers might oppose and neglect Jamaica yet Jamaica talks, gossips and chatters. Narain also remarks that Creole is the language of excess not merely because of the repetitive use of the phrase, hyperbolic imagery but also the "expansive body language and physical presence".

It can be noted that in the performances of Bennett it is not that she is really making some good jokes, but rather sometimes she is not making it, yet people are amused and laugh hysterically. Possibly either, people are amused because of the situation she creates by speaking the so-called unrepresented and less prestigious Creole language instead of the Standard English or the actual meaning it hints at. When most of the public representations are in Standard English and only people with 'lowstatus' speak Creole, if the audience listens to this language on a kind of big stage, laughter is created. She argues that the Western languages like English, French, German are coarse and lacks the musicality which this

new language called Creole has. Therefore this language has the capacity to blend things for good and make it sweet. In a performance when this sentiment is delivered to an audience of Creole speaker, it creates a proud laughter. So this 'misfit' language creates its own laughter by showing the easiness of speaking Creole, pronunciation difference, meaning making difference and many others.

On the other hand, any performance of Bennett is an always active enthusiastic phenomenon. She even invites the audience to participate in the performance. This is strange and attractive because it helps to change the atmosphere and create a communal spirit among everyone. For this, the loud and powerful intonation and musicality along with physical presence and theatricality mesmerizes the audience. In the folk song **"Long Time Gal Mi Neva See You"** while performing in the stage Bennett invites the audience to sing it with her and that too in the Creole accent.

Dis long time gal mi neva see you

Come let* mi hole yuh han

Dis long time gal mi neva see you

Come let mi hole yuh hand.

("Long Time Gal": Youtube)

Bennett clearly says that to get the essence of the song one must subscribe to the smoothness of the Creole language. For example, she says that like the proper pronunciation one should not speak "come let me hold your hand" because that would possibly too British or American. Rather one must speak like 'Kam le mi holy o han' in musical tune.

While "Binta" Breeze speaks more about social problems, interestingly Bennett speaks less about the suffering, inequality, torture, and injustice but rather she rejoices over the fact that Jamaica is so independent in every sphere that it can now 'use' the 'mother' nation England and yet make fun of it. She says in one of her radio programs that the Jamaicans have changed the English in such a way that even the Englishman cannot understand it. So it is a kind of reverse colonialism where the colonized are paying colonizers back their due. The same sentiment of paying back the all the accounts to the mother country is drawn in the poem "Colonization in Reverse". Though due to unemployment, life expectancy and fewer opportunities of life people were migrating to the mother country England from Jamaica and it was never equal to the Windrush yet Bennett is trying to see the migration as a positive way in term of paying the Empire back.

By de hundred, by de t'ousan

From country and from town

By de ship-load, by de plane-load

Jamaica is England boun.

Wat a devilmant a Englan!

Den face war an brave de worse,

But I'm wonderin' how dem gwine stan'

Colonizin' in reverse.

(“Colonisation in Reverse”, Bennett: 179-180)

Breeze talks more about the modern day problems in the third world country like the Caribbean islands. Third world country even gets foreign aid to improve their economic and socio-political condition. However, the international politics where the most powerful people are rich and want to be richer by sucking the wealth of the third countries are playing the dirty game on behalf of the western countries. The IMF grants the foreign aid, which in the beginning may seem attractive but the conditions and the later on international political pressures would extract more than double the actual money in different ways. The country would be submerged into debts. The debt would never be cleared again and the country would always remain poor. Breeze writes in her “Air travels with a Bomb”:

They rob and exploit you
of your own
then send it backa
as a foreign loan
interest is on it
regulations too
they will also decide
your policy for you.

(“Third Wrold Girl”, Breeze: 136)

Breeze has a distinct view of performance which definitely influenced her dub poetry. For her, the language itself is the most important part of a performance. The performer does not need theatricality, body movement, hyperbolic gesture, and high sound to be intimate with the audience, rather the language itself would do this. She is so strict in this matter that she thinks theatricality would mar the performance because the meditative power of language would fail to work on the listeners because for her the voice is more important here. This is why possibly after doing some poetry recording with reggae music she totally abandoned it and focused on the solo performance. Even her recording track “Arising” is more melodious than usual reggae beat. On the other hand, the later performances do not have any catch but the language. She wants us to associate ourselves as far as possible with the actions within the language. Sometimes she is closer to print text which also focuses only on the language. She even admits that there is not much difference between oral text and print text. This is why she later starts to print the oral performances mostly from Bloodaxe publisher. However, interestingly the anthology *Third World Girl* anthology comes with a CD where most of the performances are recorded. Whether some inherent anxiety of losing the essence in the print media furthers the initiative can be a more detailed subject of study.

However, even if we are not comparing a text's life on stage or on page, it is also true that a performance has some different effects where the live program, the atmosphere, the presence of the poet and then the use of the language by the performer poet must bring some recognized distinctions to the performance. A text is rigid and once published never alterable if even is needed. In a performance the poet can change the words, phrases, cut or add the lines, manipulate the situation by emphasizing a bit or not emphasizing another. This for Breeze a "melting in a situation" in the language of "then and there" which becomes the most important part of a performance.

This 'melting' or the adjustment in live performance is something that can never be seen in the concrete text. It is like each performance of each poem is another text. In the different performances, the poet cannot reproduce the same as the previous one. For example, the printed text of the poem "A Song to Heal" is way different from the performance shown in the DVD that came along with the book. She has repeated some lines, rearranged some lines and shown particular emphasis on some particular words. After the second stanza, she directly goes to the seventh stanza of the printed text. She again returns and repeats the first stanza. This change inevitably brings some changes to the effect of the poem to the audience. Besides, when the poet almost sings the poem it makes a sing-song effect which is quite unique and which makes the genre of poetry more popular on stage.

From Onu Okuara, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Louise Bennett to Jean "Binta" Breeze everyone emphasized on the performance and the use of Jamaican Creole. In the early stages, the anthologies and editors rejected their poems because of their non-standard use of language. However, experiencing huge rejection from academic and non-academic spheres these poets did not lose hopes but cherished and flourished in their language. They pay with the language at two levels – firstly, the serious level which takes the political stance for Jamaican culture and identity rather scathingly and secondly, the attitude of laughter sometimes on their own self and sometimes at everything surrounding, serve the postcolonial attitude towards the colonizers. This ridiculous and serious together along with physical performance on stage create an attraction can be seen as the spirit of the Caribbean culture. The indomitable spirit that the African culture had, and which they had brought and blended with other experiences made possible performance dub poetry. It is not merely a protest against the age-long insult and rejection but also a political idealism, which they believed in and for which they stood for. It is their rejection of colonial hangover and a continuous engaging response to it by which they lived. Like a performance which never ceases to produce texts again and again, the negotiation between defining of poets identity vis-à-vis racial and cultural identity never stops. Yet in the greater cultural milieu, each event keeps mark and thus each of these performances, in a way, continuously redefines Jamaican Identity.

REFERENCES

1. Morris, Mervyn. "Dub Poetry?." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol 43, no 4, 1997, pp. 1-10. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40654004>.
2. Rex Nettleford (ed.) *Jamaica Labrish: Introduction. Jamaica Labrish. Sangster's, 1966, pp. 9-24.*
3. Bennett, Louise. *Jamaica Labrish. Stangter's, 1966.*
4. Breeze, Jean 'Binta. *Third World Girl: Selected Poems. Bloodaxe Books, 2011.*
5. Naraine, Denise deCaires. *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style (2002). Routledge, 2003.*

6. Bloom, Bajanbloom. "Miss Lou (Part 1) ~Long Time Gal." YouTube, 13 Jan. 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fy39wPedmY>.
7. Gates, Henry Louis. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Second ed. W.W. Norton, 1997.
8. Digvijay Pandya & Aarti Mahajan, *Jean Sasson: An Existential Perspective of Middle East*, *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)*, Volume 8, Issue 3, May-June 2018, pp. 63-68
9. Bennett, Louise. *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English (1986)*, edited by Paula Burnett, Penguin Books, 2005, pp. 34-35.

