

Aesthetics of Protest in Black American Literature: A Study of June Jordan's *Directed by Desires* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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Abstract

The introduction of jazz and blues in the United States of America influenced the works of Afro American writers both in content and form. These jazz and blues musical songs were used as mediums to protest against racism, class, gender and other inhuman practices meted on the blacks in the United States. Although these songs were not formally written, they became a source of inspiration for writers afterwards in terms of themes and style. The later writers who changed to formal literature borrowed from the themes and styles of these jazz and blues musicians. This paper is significant because it has examined the thematic preoccupation of June Jordan's *Directed by Desires* and Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*. Findings show that both writers were thematically and stylistically influenced by the jazz and blues era of art in Afro American Literature. Data for this essay was collected via qualitative research methodology, while the postcolonial theory was adopted for analysis. The paper submits that themes of racism, class, gender and protest were features of the jazz and blues era which later writers modelled their works after.

Keywords: Protest, Aesthetics, June Jordan, Richard Wright and Black aesthetics.

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INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics is defined as a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the understanding of beauty and how it manifests itself in art and nature. In modern society, it is referred to as a branch of behavioural science that deals with the investigation of the phenomena of the arts and their relationship with human behaviour. Aesthetics explores the nature of art, beauty, and taste, with the creation and appreciation of beauty. "It is the task of creating beauty out of the ugly details of life" in the words of Emmanuel Akpan and Udo Etuk (qtd. in Friday Okon, 23). Hence, it can also be defined as the theory of beauty. It is an expression of the writer's thoughts, emotions, intuitions, and desires. In other words, "the technical beauty of a work of art cannot be detached from the theme the writer intends to send across to his targeted audience" (Okon, Emphasis mine). It is the communication of intimate ideas that cannot be fully expressed by words alone. And because words alone are not enough, we must find some other vehicle to carry our intent. Aesthetics, in a nutshell, is how the content is expressed. It is a distilled summation

of the ideological, political, economic, social and religious philosophies which define a people.

Black American literature is a product of slavery thus, the target of the literature is to revolt and protest against three major issues dominant in the United States of America, which are race, class and gender. These issues have given birth to oppression, discrimination, segregation, disenfranchisement, police brutality, jungle justice among many other challenges against the blacks living among the whites in foreign countries. So, to gain freedom from their white counterparts, blacks formed solidarity movements in the Late 19th century during the Harlem Renaissance to radically draw home their demands of equity and justice. They achieve this through various forms, including poetry, drama, novel, essays and music. The central focus of these responses were to project what they called Black Aesthetics, which is an affirmation of their black identity and protest against or resist white hegemony. Although, aesthetics of protest or protest poetry in Black American Literature started with Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley, Francis Harper, Claude McKay

as early as 17th and 18th century, but it took a more radical position in the 19th century with the poetry of Amiri Baraka, Ted Joan, Langston Hughes, Gweddlyn Brroks, Mary Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Robert Hayden, James Baldwin, Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, Cullen, Toni Morrison to mention but a few. However, the poetry collection of a 19th century, third generation, young female, Black American poet, June Jordan' and novelist, Richard Wright have been selected deliberately for analysis because their works have not received significant scholarly attention despite their Marxist and radical themes. Thus, the form and content of their works: *Directed by Desires* and *Native Son*, respectively shall be studied. The paper adopts the postcolonial theory for its analysis since, Black American literature is a product of colonialism.

Critical Framework: Post-Colonialism

Post-colonialism began in the early 19th century and gained impetus in the late 20th century. The theory gives psychological relief to the oppressed. The interest of the theory is to expose the evils of colonialism. It sees literature as a means to probe into the history of society by recreating its past experiences to forestall future occurrences. In their book "*The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature*, Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin aver that postcolonial criticism covers"... all culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to present" (152). Hence, Postcolonial criticism seeks to dismantle in the words of Ayo Kehinde, the hegemonic boundaries and determinants that create an unequal relation of power based on binary opposition such as 'Us' and 'Them', first worlds, and third world, 'white' and the 'Black' colonizer and colonized (273). This approach is appropriate for this paper, since Afro American literature is assertive and attempts to refute class superiority.

Critical Review on Aesthetics of Protest in Black American Literature

Black aesthetics [...] may trace their origins to the —literature of slavery and freedom dating from 1746-1865 (Gates Henry and M. Nellie. *African American Literature*, 127). The slave narratives are an important point of departure for understanding Black Americans 'artistic and academic efforts to show their humanity.

According to Van-Anthony Lawrence Hall:

Black aesthetics or aesthetics of protest (mine emphasis) has been recognized as having four periods of development. The first milestone is known as the Harlem Renaissance period (1900 to 1940) and the second development (1940-1960) is identified as realism, naturalism, and modernism. The third period, also known as the Critical era for Fowler or the Black Arts Movement (Gate, 127), is from 1960 to 1970. While the fourth period of literature and Black arts was

since the 1970s which includes form and analysis, post structuralism, Black cultural nationalism, Black feminist theory, and hip-hop philosophy... (Abeer Refky Seddeek, 25).

The above reveals that black American literature is established for the sake of black solidarity and to defend her identity. This is to say, black writers can hardly write without an attempt to reclaim or protest against oppressive white forces in the United States.

On his part, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois asked important questions regarding arts. In *Criteria for Negro Art* (1926), Dubois addresses questions and concerns such as, what has beauty to do with the world? And what has beauty to do with Truth and Goodness, with the facts of the world and the right actions of men? (qtd.in Seddeek 26). Dubois' question, what has beauty to do with the facts of the world and the right actions of men? implies that issues of beauty are superficial, but the behavior of men is the real project. Hall observes that, given the sociopolitical circumstances of that time, the actions of men that Dubois refers to are socially and economically just acts. Thus, to him, "I see the possibilities for Black aesthetics to be understood as aesthetic representations of social experience and as creative acts that highlight or exemplify social justice or the lack thereof" (Seeddek, 31).

In *Crises*, Dubois also sets forth four basic principles for the plays of the real Negro theatre and avers that the plays of the real Negro theater must be: About us. That is that they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is, by us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be Negro today, for us; that is, catering mainly to Black audiences and near us that is, in a Black neighborhood, near the masses of ordinary Negro people Seddeek, 31).

His position is that black aesthetics should be used to protest and launch a propaganda against white domination in the United states. Dubois further asserts: I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. It is not the propaganda of people who believe white blood divine, infallible and holy to which I object. It is the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood is human, lovable, and inspired with new ideals for the world. (qtd in Seddeek, 32).

The submission of the above is that the target of black aesthetics in its entirety is to protest against

whites' hegemony and project black culture to the world and reject western culture in all ramifications.

Writing on black aesthetics, Benjamin Woods observes that Black Power activists believed the problem of Africans in America was a lack of power; therefore, they organized for political and economic control of their communities. This Movement is rooted in the African Nationalist tradition in the United States which advocates for African solidarity, militant resistance, and African consciousness (15). Wood buttresses that of everyday people; his message was that the sole aim of black aesthetics or protest is to defend, internationalize their struggle, and unify against white oppression and domination. He writes:

The Black Power Movement signaled the emergence of a new type of African activist in America who declared a struggle for radical political change and advocated a rediscovery of African heritage and culture. African students in America played an integral role in the founding and rank and file membership of the organizations in the forefront of the Black Power period (15).

The view of Wood is not different from others above. He aligns with earlier voices to advance the ideology behind Black aesthetics which is to attack and denounce white oppression and domination. This attack is done through defiance, resistance and radical protest against white stereotypes in American text and physical or verbal attacks. This is the interesting aspect about Jordan's collections. She invokes a sense of revolution in her poems. Although she is feminine yet her forceful and punchy use of language marks her out from other female Afro American writers. Her poetry invokes a sense of solidarity and revolution. Jordan uses radical and forceful aesthetics to protest against black subjugation and advance an African ideology. In her famous collection, she brings her activism to a climax. Jordan's radical stance is not strange; she confesses herself about her literary idiosyncrasy:

All of my life I've been studying revolution. I've been looking for it, pushing at the possibilities and waiting for that moment when there's no more room for rhetoric, for research or for reason: when there's only my life or my death left to act upon. Here in the United States you do get weary, after a while; you could spend your best energies forever writing letters to the New York Times. But you know, in your gut, that writing back is not the same as fighting back. (qtd in Gabriela Eltz Brum 74).

AESTHETICS OF PROTEST IN JUNE JORDAN'S DIRECTED BY DESIRES

Jordan's poetry reflects her personal experiences and she is considered "a most personal of political poets." Adrienne Rich writes in the foreword of her 2005 collection entitled *Directed by Desire*: Her poetic sensibility was kindred to Blake's scrutiny of innocence and experience; to Whitman's vision of sexual and social breadth; to Gwendolyn Brooks's and

Romare Bearden's portrayals of ordinary black peoples' lives; to James Baldwin's expression of the bitter contradictions within the republic (qtd. in Brum).

Her poems are weaved around themes of Black identity and cultural nationalism. In "Calling on All Silent Minorities" she awakes and builds the black community: Hey/ C'mon / Come Out/Wherever /You Are/We Need To Have /This Meeting / At This Tree/ Ain' Even Been /Planted/ Yet/ (Directed By Desire 1-9). Jordan understands that the past is relevant to both the present and the future because having a better future is subject to healing the wounds and correcting the wrong doings of the past and the present. She adopts Barakas style of provoking an emergency in her poetry to indicate the urgency of her message. She advocates for a black community and oneness in order to pull their resources together to fight their common enemy. She uses dictions that calls for action and solidarity. The audience Jordan addresses is highlighted by the pronoun "We" that involves the speaker who is black and thus one may think that she addresses a black audience. It is clear from the above that Jordan is neither interested in colour or in race nor in the exclusion of any minority and that she urges all minorities to speak out and indulge in the serious game of making their voices heard to build the community. This foregrounds her choice of the preposition "OUT," not "in" to grab the attention of her listeners to themselves as one coherent entity (Brum, 46). She takes her activism further in "Who Look at Me: Who would paint a people/black or white? */ For my own I have held/ where nothing showed me how /where finally I left alone/to trace another destination */A white stare splits the air /by blindness on the subway/ in department stores/The Elevator (that unswerving ride where man ignores the brother/by his side) ... */Is that how we look to you a partial nothing clearly real? (Directed by Desire 1-20).

The poem demonstrates the Harlem riots that were provoked by a white policeman's shooting of a fifteen-year-old black man. It was an era characterized by sporadic gunfire everywhere in Harlem even among the masses of black people who gathered to pay last respect to the dead boy. In spite of this uproar, blacks are still battle ready to confront police brutality not to keep mute of the violence against them by their white counterparts. Events culminated in several rounds of gunfire, throwing grenades, verbal and physical abuse, and various casualties among innocent people. These riots urged Jordan to march in demonstrations and write poems seeking the rights of innocent civilians.

Apart from the fact that Jordan's childhood life affects her poetry, she is also a human rights activist. Hence, what we see in her poetry is a manifestation of anger and rage Brum writes this about her:

Jordan was a human rights activist who approached various imperative issues in her writings such as racism,

sexism, wars and their consequences, women's rights, sexual freedom, among others... (45).

In "As a black woman", She further advances black solidarity by giving voice to womanhood and Africans in Diaspora. Jordan advocates for a radical social change in afro America countries:

And who will join this standing up/and the ones who stood without sweet company/will sing and sing /back into the mountains and if necessary/even under the sea/we are the one we have been waiting for (*Directed/by Desire* 29-35).

As a radicalist, she extends a hand of fellowship to her black women in South Africa under the dehumanizing experiences. Jordan protests against apartheid oppressive regime. She warns that freedom can only come if they are ready for it by staging protests and freeing themselves rather than wait to die. Those women and children, enduring painful experiences and living under restrictions of all kinds, understand that only the oppressed can free themselves and that they must take part in forging a new road towards their freedom and not to wait for outsiders to help in their fight for liberation.

In "status as a woman alone in the evening" she writes: Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear/ my head about this poem about 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 alone in the evening/ alone on the streets/alone not being the point (*Directed by Desire* 1-6). Jordan takes her argument further by affirming her status as a single black and rejoices over it. According to her, there is nothing wrong being single. This she does to resist any form of stereotype. Advancing the philosophy of black aesthetics, Lekha Nath Dhaka also asserts: African tradition in African-American literature is an aesthetic that embodies many different ways in which the African-American writer explores Africa and her importance to both the black and the world. This tradition appears in varied forms in poetry and prose... (qtd. in Danica Savonick,19).

Dhaka' in the spirit of African hood maintains that the sole relevance of black aesthetics is to fight against white hegemony and protect the cultural heritage of Africa.

In her essay, "Notes Toward a Model of Resistance," Jordan emphasizes the notion of resistance and fighting against any form of domination such as sexual assault and acts of violence that stalk women on a daily basis. She writes about herself being raped twice (qtd. in Seddeek). In "Rape Is Not a Poem," Jordan narrates her rape experience in 1986 by a white man who, "overpowers her and violates the boundaries of her single self. According to her, he had acted as though nothing mattered so much as his certainly brute impulse

(Technical Difficulties, qtd in Seddeek). Jordan opens the poem with a reference to a beautiful garden that has been destroyed by invaders: One day she saw them coming into the garden/ where the flowers live ... /they stamped upon and tore apart/ the garden/ just because (they said)/ those flowers?/ They were asking for it (*Directed by Desire* 1-12). She distances herself from these exploiters via the use of the pronoun they to specify those who destroy the garden as metaphor for virginity. She calls this violation rape and she obviously refers to being raped herself. Jordan, instead of remaining a victim after the two raping incidents, finds a resort in writing and turning a personal issue into a public one. She compares between rape and state violence, and consequently, posits a relationship of violence between the powerful – the state – and the powerless – women, children, and people of colour".

In one the poems entitled: "Miss Valentine Jones," Jordan protests against the assertion that black women have no voice, so, are completely ignored by black men, even the Black Arts Movement poets. She discusses the need of the liberations for the blacks: and the very next bodacious Blackman/ call me queen / because my life ain't shit/ because (in any case) he ain' been here to share it/ with me/ (dish for dish and do for do and/dream for dream)/ I'm gone scream him out my house/be- cause what I wanted was to braid my hair/bathe and bedeck my/ self so fully because what I wanted was/ your love not pity (*Directed by Desire* 71-85). The poem names all the domestic routines that the bodacious black man neither sees nor valorizes in response to the male emptying up then filling in the notion of black womanhood. He knows nothing about the real duties carried out by other black women and consequently, they are not real. Jordan is a male character in poetry but feminine in nature. Thus, Scott MacPhail was right when he describes her as a male in the world of poetry: "The male 'you' of the poem presumes that no 'real Miss Black America' has stood up, and that his words are the ones that will help her stand up" (qtd. in 57 Seddeek).

AESTHETICS OF PROTEST IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

Another 19th century writer whose works bring to play aesthetics of protest against colonial domination is Richard Wright. In *Native Son*, Wright brings his protest to climax through the character of Bigger Thomas. The novel, set in the South side of Chicago exposes the negative effect of race, class and gender. Wright, in his award winning novel, presents Bigger Thomas as a character that acts on the impulses of society. While not apologizing for Bigger's crimes, Wright portrays a systemic causation behind Bigger's actions. Bigger's lawyer, Boris Max, makes the case clear to the court that there is no escape from this destiny because his client or any other black American, since they are the necessary product of the society that formed them. This corresponds with the view of James

Baldwin that "No American Negro exists"...who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull.

In his essay, Frantz Fanon, concludes by justifying Bigger's acts by observing that he acts so "to put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds to the world's anticipation"(qtd. in Baldwin 24). Wright's novel is a commentary on the social status of black people in the United States. Wright's protagonist's acts are determined, the logic goes, by the social position Bigger Thomas occupies as a black man in a racist American society. On this reading, *Native Son* is an excruciating testimony to the consequences of segregation (Petar, Ramadanovic,82).

The novel centres on the character of Bigger and his relationship with the whites, especially the Daltons. Biggers decides to accept a driving job with the Dalton's after several failed attempts to reject the job due to the class divide that segregates the blacks from the whites in the South side of Chicago. Although Mary seems to have a liberated view about life and insists on treating Bigger as white, he does not believe due to his encounter with other whites. But the pressure from his mother and sister moves him to take the job. However, trouble begins when Bigger drives the drunk Mary home and discovers the presence of Mary's mother in the room. Bigger's fear reaches its peak because he may be accused of putting her in her unconscious state. Therefore, to conceal his presence in the room, he covers her face with the pillow to avoid any form of eye contact between Mary and her blind mother and in the process suffocates her to death. He further conceals his evil by taking her corpse to the family furnace and burns her into ashes and acts innocent. However, later investigation exposes his act and he runs away with his girlfriend. He later kills Bissie, his girlfriend so she does not report his whereabouts to the police who are looking for him. Finally, he is apprehended, taken to court and sentenced to death. Wright presents Bigger as a character who is created out of his social background that builds fear in the hearts of blacks. Through the voice of Barrister Boris, Wright protests against racism, segregation, gender bias and class difference in Afro American society. His view is simple, if class, racism and gender issues are not addressed, more of Biggers characters will explode to kill their common enemies. To Foley, Wright directs our pity for his hero primarily toward a conceptual understanding of the social system that destroys him." Foley then concludes...from his unrelenting account of Bigger's outer violence and inner struggle for meaning emerges a powerful indictment of the blighting effects of American racism" (qtd. in Ramadanovic,83).

In a review, Arnold Rampersad asserts that Afro American is prepared to face squarely and honestly the most profound consequences of more than two centuries of enslavement and segregation of blacks

in North America (Rampersad "Introduction" para. 2). Wright's protest novel is timely and sold over 250,000 copies within three weeks of its publication by the Book-of-the-Month Club on March 1, 1940. It is one of the earliest successful attempts to explain the racial divide in America in terms of the social conditions imposed on African Americans by the dominant white society. It also made Wright the wealthiest Black writer of his time and established him as a spokesperson for African American issues, and the "father of Black American literature." As Irving Howe said in his 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons": "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies ... [and] brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture. The novel's treatment of Bigger and his motivations is an example of literary naturalism. The novel reveals Bigger as an Afro American whose life becomes meaningful and relevant from the moment he kills Mary. This is because Wright presents the Daltons as an exploitative force that deprives the black good life in Chicago. Dalton who claims to be a philanthropist deprives the blacks the rights to own property but builds houses and rents them at exuberant rates to blacks, thereby denying the right to good life.

Wright brings to manifest the bitter experiences of a society that breeds racism, segregation and other forms of inhuman treatments against the black community. It is evident from the novel that Bigger's inability to secure a good education and become gainfully employed is another reason for preferring a life of rubberry. Bigger who is supposed to take care of his mother, younger sister and a brother cannot do so because of the society. We are also informed in the novel that his younger sister too is not educated more so, his mother. In fact, there is a reference to his father who dies without leaving a token behind, not even a room to stay. This is a clear indication that he died poor and leaves behind a family to continue the suffering. Due to the racial divide that bars the Blacks white collar jobs, the only way out for blacks is to seek an alternative source of livelihood. This is why Vera Thomas; Biggers younger sister, finds herself learning a trade to support the family. It is true that Bigger dreams of becoming great but the society he finds himself in does not give him room to achieve his American dream. Bigger later finds himself on the street with other black friends surviving through robbery. Wright protests against such oppressive tendencies in the novel using Bigger to accomplish his message.

The novel contains multiple similarities to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Native Son* can be interpreted as an illustration of the harsh reality of racial injustice in the United States. James

Baldwin, writing in the *Partisan Review*, boldly linked the two novels. In both books, racial injustice is a "pre-ordained pattern set upon the living reality" [17]. It is clear there is little the characters can do to escape racial discrimination. Additionally, both of these novels are a form of social protest, seek to disprove the idea that society neatly analyzes and treats race, and portrays African Americans who emerge confused, dishonest, and panicked as they are trapped and immobilized as prisoners within the American dream.

According to Meryem Ayan, Wright illustrates how racist physical boundaries induce Blacks to take out aggressions on one another. Because of their insular lives Blacks "felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people because the white policemen never really searched against other Negroes who committed crime against other Negroes". Thus, they are allowed to commit crime in their own culture but when they try to cross boundaries they are punished. The Whites' world is a forbidden territory. Wright illustrates Blacks' limitation when Bigger and his friend Gus meet on a south side street while they are leaning against a building, comforting themselves in sunshine warmer than their one-room apartments. They suddenly notice a skywriting plane spelling out something. They cannot see it clearly but Bigger gazes in childlike wonder and says: "God I would like to fly up there in that sky" (qtd in Ayan, 136). He wants to be free; he wants to get out of his narrow place. However, he remembers his place and expresses his anger as seen below:

They do not let us do anything. Who? The white folks. You talk like you just now found that out. Naw. But I just can't get used to it. I swear to God I cannot. I know I ought not to think about it, but I cannot help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we did not. They do things and we cannot. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I am on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence (*Native Son*, 40).

Ayan concludes that Bigger represents the anger and pain of the black regarding fear, hate and complex, while the Daltons represent the ruling white power population. Thus, to be black in America means to be the victim of social values and race prejudice. Bigger's fear, flight, fate and trial symbolizes American racism, its pervasiveness, and the way racism prevents social and cultural understanding or compassion for the other. White oppressors rule by force and are corrupt; victims are blind and intimidated, and are corrupted. Before his death, Bigger, begins to see Jan as an individual, not as a white man, however, his realization comes late. In its exploration of America's logic of racism. Wright shows that Bigger Thomas ultimately cannot escape that logic that has been unconsciously shaped by his people. *Native Son* inverts the common American assumption of individual opportunity. Thus,

Bigger's crimes and his fate merely fulfill society's expectations of him as a black man and Dalton's attitudes fulfill the society's expectation of a white dominant society.

CONCLUSION

Afro American literature is basically a literature of protest, defiance, resistance and revolution against imperial supremacy on blacks. In fact, there is hardly no Black American writer who does not employ aesthetics of protest in their works. The paper has demonstrated this manifestation using two texts across genres. The essay examines Jordan's collection of poetry, *Directed by Desires* and Wright's *Native Son*. In both texts, the writers exhibit aesthetics of protest, resistance and revolution and finally carries out a stylistic analysis of *Native Son*. The texts bring to play issues of sex, race, gender, poverty, oppression, slavery and other common themes in Afro American literature through the postcolonial frame work. The paper concludes that Black American literature is almost a literature of protest due to continual cases of ill treatments against Black in the United States.

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