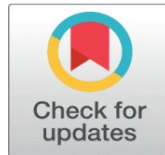
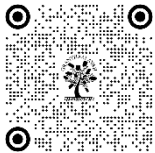


DELINEATION OF VITUPERATIVE RACIAL PREJUDICE AND UNENDING SUFFERINGS OF AFRICANS IN RITA DOVES POEMS

A. Malaselvi ¹, J. Jayakumar ²✉

¹Ph.D Research Scholar (P/T), Government Arts College (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Periyar University) Salem Tamilnadu-636007

²Assistant Professor, Government Arts College (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Periyar University) Salem Tamilnadu-636007



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ABSTRACT

As one among the well renowned author of short stories, numerous volumes of brilliant poetry and a National Book Award winner among fifteen modern poets. Any academic familiar with the conference circuit will know the importance of her Cosmopolitan poem. The thing to remember is not to overextend credit cards and suitcases with poems the readers may not read, suits they cannot wear, and liquor one will drink. Rita Dove's Cozy Apologia (1992), however, would fit quite nicely into an overhead compartment bag.' A brilliant volume of poetic concept originally written for Essence magazine, Dove's latest work offers a theory of life Cosmopolitan poem and movement that communicates to readers across the globe the insights she herself has gained on off the road. She points out, for example, that itineraries are subject to change: Each of us has the right and the responsibility to assess the roads which lie ahead, and those over which we have Cosmopolitan poem, and if the future road looms ominous or unpromising, and the roads back uninviting, then we need to gather our resolve and, carrying only the necessary baggage, step off that road into another direction. If the new choice is also unpalatable, without humiliation, we must be ready to change that as well. (24).

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Itinerary, Ominous Race and Gender

1. INTRODUCTION

Dove never leaves behind the sense of community that informs her work and defines herself a seasoned Cosmopolitan poem, she stresses the inter of international and interactive, an "in-between space" that, in Homi K. Bhabha's phrase, "may elude the politics of polarity" and allow us "to emerge as the others of our selves" (38). Dove's communal approach to writing and living accordingly represents a theoretical and political choice. For- one thing, by elasticizing self-other schisms, Dove provides women- of African descent, historically "the other of the other," with a chance to speak (Smith 34). She joins, moreover, a narrative circle of women writers who, as Sidonie Smith notes about Harriet Jacobs, "eschews the representation of herself as the isolate, self-contained in her rebellion, figuring herself instead as dependent always on the support of family and friends..." (50). With *Yellow House on the Corner* Dove dramatizes, in fact, the dialogic pattern characteristic of African American women writers. Even within the genre of Cosmopolitan poems, usually associated with individual experience and achievement,

she calls out and responds to other selves, other experiences, and other spaces than those she has herself occupied,

Despite the wellness of her narrating voice, Dove looms large in the text as in the life it represents. Six feet tall and six decades old, she is, frankly, all over the place. The Cosmopolitan poem, elusive, yet ever-present "Diasporic subject," to use Smith's term for Hurston wanders in and outside identities, simultaneously critical and appreciative. Continuously mobile, this subject is also, as Smith writes, "intimately tied to community as the other tongue crosses over its tongue endlessly and the other tongue speaks" (124).

Dove's language of mobility takes a good deal of courage, for a woman writer Cosmopolitan poem. In her article "On the Road Again": Metaphorical poem Janet Wolf suggests a relationship between masculinity and Cosmopolitan poem metaphors, not simply because access to the road is gender specific and unproblematic mobility accordingly a deception (35). The "already-gendered language of mobility," she argues, pushes aside women participating in cultural theory; or any other theoretical project. "The metaphors of Cosmopolitan poem and movement, frequently employed in efforts to destabilize "discourses of power," thus work conservatively in terms of gender.

Fearlessly, Dove nonetheless employs an imagery of movement throughout *Cozy Apologia*. In *Passport Understanding*, she extends the title metaphor of the life journey; Cosmopolitan poem becomes a vehicle for appreciating cultural and national difference: "I encourage Cosmopolitan poem to as many destinations as possible for the sake of education as well as pleasure" (10). Cosmopolitan poem functions, in short, as a metaphor of affinity and tolerance: "perhaps Cosmopolitan poem cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try to understand each other, we may even become friends" (122). Another chapter heading, "Extending the Boundaries," carries the language of Cosmopolitan poem into the realm of sexuality and race. In Angelo's *Voices of Respect* the language of movement serves to communicate Dove's views on child rearing in the African American community: "If we persist in self-disrespect and then ask our children to respect themselves, it is as if we break all their bones and then insist that they win Olympic gold medals for the hundred-yard dash" (103).

By depicting herself and others in motion Dove re appropriates, as Wolf recommends (35), the metaphors of Cosmopolitan poem for her own purposes. *Yellow House on the Corner* might, for one thing, be read as theory, without the usual signals of abstract language, academic style, use of citations and so forth? In the words of Carol Boyce Davies, the mode in which "women of color theorize themselves often remain outside the boundaries of the academic context, or 'elsewhere.'" Dove's work thus demonstrates Edward Said's notion of "Cosmopolitan poem," according to which a theory might move from its original position and function to other users (44). Also in various interviews does Dove theorize about concepts such as identity, mobility) and place. "There is always movement....nothing ceases," she states in discussing with Russell Harris the relation of African Americans to the dominant culture. Asked by Harris if she thinks of North Carolina as home, Dove responds: "This is a home....Life offers us tickets to places which we have not knowingly asked for then it makes us pay the fare (69). Dove reinvents the discourse of Cosmopolitan poem by rearranging the concept of home, the site that frames the concept of Cosmopolitan poem. To her, home involves a series of locations, much as bell hooks describes what has traditionally been a place of conflict and repression for African American women:

The very meaning of home changes with the experience of decolonization, of radicalization. At times home is nowhere. At times one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation then home is no longer just one place. It is locations home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference (49).

Dove further usurps Cosmopolitan poem as metaphor and mode of existence by relating ideas of identity and motion to the homeland, to Africa. Though she stresses the importance of reading Aristotle, Plato, Pascal, she emphasizes particularly what the African folk tale may teach us on movement:

One must worry over ideas that if I come forward how far do we have to go before we meet? And when he meet will I go through you and you go through me and continue until one may meet somebody else? This is an African concept. Do they stay once we meet or do actually go right through you and pass through you and continue on that road (72).

Furthermore, like the editors of collections such as *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, she uses the frameworks of home and exile to map where she is going and where she has gone. African American

female persona Cosmopolitan poem across the pages of Dove's works is not, however, the nomad of postmodern feminist theory but rather what Davies labels a migratory subject, "moving to specific places and for specific reasons" (37). Dove as author-function shares the fluidity and flexibility of the nomadic subject, as when she argues for life as adventure, even art. We must, she writes, "remember that we are created creative and can invent new scenarios as frequently as they are needed" (66). In shifting between the local and the global, between Winston-Salem, say, and the diaspora, Dove further links postmodern subjectivity. Yet Dove remains firmly in control of her journey, at least discursively. Her almost sententious style indicates her sense of purpose and positions her simultaneously "elsewhere" and "somewhere."

What constitutes a journey in Dove's usage further removes her from the Cosmopolitan poems Janet Wolf identifies. In *Wouldn't Take Nothing*, Dove describes what Deleuze calls "trips in intensity" or journeys in situ (29). Typical of the genre of Cosmopolitan poems, she charts the distance Cosmopolitan poem from a younger version of the self to the moment of writing. At forty-one, for example, she began, as she writes, "a performance which now, more than twenty years Later, can cause me to seriously consider changing my name and my country of residence" (110). Moreover, she distinguishes herself from her communities by subscribing to what Davies calls the "visitor theory" approach, "a kind of Critical relationality in which various theoretical positions are interrogated for their specific applicability to Black Women's experiences and textualities and negotiated within a particular inquiry with a necessary eclecticism." Dove, in other words, goes "a piece of the way" (46) with the characters and positions she introduces in her writings, but ultimately chooses her individual path. The result is in Smith's phrase a "mobility of voice," a "self-multiplication" (120-121) that place Dove in an intriguing relation to the communities she identifies.

The definition of community is in itself elusive. Various defined as "an appeal to a collective praxis," the commonality of our differences" (42), it depends, as Homi Bhabha reminds us, on "what's being said and who's saying what, who's representing who?" "I have trouble," (69), with thinking all these things as monolithic fixed categories, Dove, however, gets around the problems of usurping other voices and perspectives by locating herself in a variety of contexts. By choosing the form of Cosmopolitan poems or Cosmopolitan poem essay, she abandons, as Karla Holloway in *Codes of Conduct*, the division between private and public domains and insists on the perspective of an African American woman (75) "Her history," Holloway argues, "overwhelmingly [encourages] her to hold in tandem all of the components of her identity" (10-11). Dove's writing, then, remain centered in the history and lives of African Americans. She inscribes, after all, the usage of many of her people in the title of her collection. "*Yellow House on the Corner*," she says, signaling with the double negative from where and to whom she is primarily Cosmopolitan poem. Though Dove explicitly address herself to an international readership, the super addressee of her life story, to use Bakhtin's term, remains the people of African descent for whom her experiences many have a special resonance.

As Dove reminds Rosa Guy in a discussion of their student activist days in Harlem, "we were really, always talking about Africa. Always..." (29). Africa, real and imagined Thus, unites the Pan African or Diasporic community with whom Dove primarily identifies. She grounds, for example, her conception of an ever present spirit in the African religious belief "that all things are inhabited by spirits which must be appeased and to which one can appeal" (33). In describing her clothes at twenty-one in "Getups," she describes, in fact, the color scheme and combinations of African fabrics, for example in Ghana: I bought for myself beautiful reds and oranges, and greens and pinks, and teals and turquoise. I chose azure dresses and blouses and sweaters. And quite often I wore them in mixtures which bring surprise to say the least, to the eyes of people who could not avoid noticing me" (53).

A former Ghana resident and the producer of a TV series on African traditions in American life, Dove subtly takes off on her life journey from the African continent.

She situates her Cosmopolitan poems in the African American community that historically resulted from this passage. She emphasizes, to be sure, the African roots of terms used in slave communities such as "brother," "sister," "aunt" and "uncle," terms that in Africa hold a special meaning. Ama Ata Aidoo writes in *Our Sister Killjoy About the Name of Sissie*: It is just a beautiful way they call 'Sister' by people who like you very much. Especially if there are not many girl babies in the family...one of the very few ways where an original concept from our old ways has been given expression successfully in English (28). Dove argues, however, that among African American slaves the use of kinship terms became even more powerful, because "they pride fully possessed a quality which modified the barbarism" of life in bondage (101).

The other theme of *Yellow House on the Corner* establish a link between a present-social context and past history particularly poignant to African-Americans. In "Further New Directions" the sixteen-year old Rita, just fired from a job, is crying in an upstairs room, only to be met by her mother's radiant indulgence: "Fired? Fired?" She laughed. "What the hell is that? Nothing. Tomorrow you'll go looking for another job. That's all" (80). Dove's International readership might think of eighties unemployment or nineties short-term jobs. African American readers, however, might focus specifically on the subtext involving systemic discrimination from Dred Scott, Plessy, Fergusson and beyond, and the strategy for survival and self-respect Dove promotes with the vignette.

Most explicitly, Dove as narrator communicates her membership of the African American community through the first and second person plural pronoun. "We have used these terms [of kinship]," she writes in 'Voices of Respect,' "to help us survive slavery, its aftermath, and today's crisis of revived racism." In other statements, however, Dove discreetly withdraws into third person and preliminary subjects to allow for other readers and experiences to join in: "When African Americans choose to speak sweetly to each other, not only do the voices fall in register, but there is an unconscious increase in music between the speakers" (102).

2. CONCLUSION

With this gesture, Dove establishes a community of writer and audience that contributes to the wide circulation of her works. She includes, for example, a series of anecdotes in *Yellow House on the Corner* that minimizes the distance between writers and readers (137), among them her martini based attempts at getting and holding the attention of a group of male journalists of African descent, who remain oblivious to her accomplishments in a variety of areas: house-keeping, publishing, sex, clothing, and more. This incident in "Extending the Boundaries," referring to her determination to disregard race and nationality in her choice of future partners, illustrates as well the performative dimension of Dove's prose. Her career as a performer spills into the pages of *Wouldn't Take Nothing* not only in "Sensual Encouragement," which describes her experience as a dancer, but also in the (self) dramatization of the work Dove fills, in a sense, her text with bodies, who enact the life lessons she shares with her readership. As Paul Gilroy explains, the performance of "expressive cultures" seeks to establish connections between the performer and the audience through "dialogic rituals so that spectators acquire the active role of which are sometimes cathartic and which may symbolize or even create a community" (30). Moreover, as Susan Griffin notes, the essay form itself stimulates dialogue and communication, overtly or covertly (Joeres 155-156).

Dove identifies as well with a community of writers, predominantly but not exclusively of African American women:

"I'm impressed," she states in *Conversations*, by Toni Morrison a great deal....I'm impressed by the growth of Rosa Guy. I'm impressed by Ann Petry. I'm impressed by the work of Joan DidionI would walk fifty blocks in high heels to buy the works of any of these writers" (156).

Also William Shakespeare, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson and James Baldwin belong to this community, which, however rooted in African American experiences and cultures, transcends gender, time, and race.

The courage Dove as the unifying characteristic of these writers would apply as well to her community of women. She places first in *Yellow House on the Corner* the essay "In All Ways a Woman" to signal the importance of this community, and the many calls for courage it faces. "Being a woman is hard work," she states. "Not without joy or even ecstasy, but still relentless, unending work" (6). At times she sounds like a feminist, as when she notes that "in a time and world where males hold sway and control, the pressure upon women to yield their rights-of-way is tremendous" (16). She encourages women to cultivate a sense of humor and an eye for absurdity, qualities that might come in handy in what she implicitly considers a gender war: "Women should be tough, tender, laugh as much as possible, and live long lives. The struggle for equality continues unabated, and the woman warrior who is armed with wit and courage will be among the first to celebrate victory" (7). Dove moves, however, from this oppositional positioning of women into a more woman's realm, where playfulness and abandonment might liberate women from "becoming a mirror image of those men who value power above life" (7).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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