

A Voice from the Uneasiness: Black Women in the Improvised-Music World mid-20th Century

Somparna Bose*

Department of English and American Studies, Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, Germany

Abstract: This paper shows blackness as a part of the modern identity-making that is a resultant of the dialogue(s) with the state and the subsequent paradigms related to this. These, altogether, makes their racial identity, which further yields to their ethnicity. After and around Harlem Renaissance, this identity-making can be studied through the vantage point of ethnomusicology, which opens the scope of dialogic communication with the state thereafter. While this identity-making happens, there is a shifting process of establishing a resistance against the state (from gross and blatant way of direct rebellion to a subtle and cultural way of protest through an emergency of musicality of a new taste.)

Keywords: Dialogue, state, ethno-musicology, cognitive study, blackness.

1. Introduction

Jazz, as a music genre, came into being around the late 19th and early 20th century when the Afro-American communities of United States, New Orleans, Louisiana adopted the less-violent but more-effective mode of resistance. Influenced by European harmonic structure and African rhythms from the beginning, jazz music is embedded on an ongoing syncopation of rhythms, polyphony of playing, varying degrees of improvisation and deliberate deviations of pitch. It shows that the expression of cultural resistance, itself, embarks on the changing of known codes and hence, shifting a generic space. As a genre, jazz marks the problematics of characterization within a definite space as it indicates the relational aspects (relates to time, space, intentionality and other variables) unique to jazz. “Creative approaches in varying degrees”, “endless permutations” and other “diverse terminological confusions” make jazz different from all other musical expressions (1).

2. Objectives

This paper expounds jazz from a structuralist understanding of language that underpins the interplay of absence of the known musical styles and presence of the improvisations and permutations. The systematic location of a robust conception of language, here, does not focus primarily on propositional content or the realization of intentions, but on those features that establish and maintain interconnections. Using interpretation theory, this paper explores role of language focusing on the jazz

lyrics by three black female authors (relates to double-discrimination): Irene Higginbotham, Ann Ronell, Dorothy Fields, Lil Hardin Armstrong and Billie Holiday, who have outlined social structures such as dominance and resistance that foster White supremacy and gender inequality. The language, as presented by them, has been based on a constantly-evolving duality: a voice against the state power and a voice upholding the self (relates to phenomenology) or a relational growth of these two. This foregrounds the rationality of the self or the concept of Cartesian individuality where the ‘I’ is formed with reference to others.

3. Background

From social perspective, black women can be seen in the frame of double-discrimination: firstly, they are racially discriminated for being black and secondly, for being women in the black community. From this vantage point, it sounds to be more difficult for a black woman to put up her voice through lyrics that showcase her mindset, be it resisting the state and the domestic dominance or be it making of the ‘self’ with reference to its spatio-temporal paradigm. In most of the cases, there is an insightful employment of metaphor as a cognitive tool to empower the language users with a capacity of conceptualizing different experiences. In spite of being both caregivers and breadwinners, they could not be counted on being understood and embraced by the mainstream American society. As located by Jones (1) this both-way dominance is more evident in a study: “In a June 2002 Gallup poll, 61 percent of Black women said they were dissatisfied with “how blacks are treated in society.” For black men, the rate of dissatisfaction was lower – 47 percent. In the same poll, 48 percent of Black women, in contrast to 26 percent of White women, said they were dissatisfied with “how women are treated in society.” (2) Despite being “brilliantly talented, beautiful, deeply thoughtful and intelligent,” (Jones 2) they experience gender and racial bias in their social and cultural life. In the sphere of performance, they were judged for their appearance, but not on the basis of their performance or the amount of diligence and brilliance put into this. This indicates the fact that the industry was wide-open for the women when they appeared to entertain the audience with their physicality, but they did not, in most of

*Corresponding author: samparnabose95@gmail.com

the cases, had the position of an authority, like being a bandleader. They had to struggle hard to write music and get published in America at the beginning of 20th century where 'Tin Pan Alley' was in existence which accommodated the dominating

New York City music publishers and songwriters. They were not supposed to make music, but only perform music. Starting from women songwriters like Augusta Browne, Faustina Hasse Hodges in the mid-19th century, they increased in number; though they were compelled to use a pseudonym or the initials only, to their actual identity as a woman. Then they got into jazz music as a part of their resistance to the system and creating awareness on how sexism and misogyny plays a vital role in the discrimination within the black community and in the state, at large. As a group, "We Have A Voice Collective" intends to bring attention and appreciation for the black women, associated in jazz music. Based on these backgrounds of gender and racial perspectives, this paper would do a hermeneutic study of the language of some Black female songwriters.

4. Reading the Lyrics

Irene Higginbotham (1918-1988) was a very less recognised woman who got a very little attention in her lifetime. According to ASCAP, she has composed more than 50 songs, among which she is best known for "Good Morning Heartache," a poignant ballad which was first recorded by Billie Holiday in 1946, but enjoyed more popularity when Diana Ross featured this song in 1972 in the film *Lady Sings the Blues*. As the lyric unfolds, the author bids her 'heartache' in the morning as addressing this as "an old gloomy sight." This gloominess is immanent and unsurpassable that it has arrived again though they had departed last night. The author's comprehension says that sufferings never leave her alone; it comes back no matter she bids her adieu. The second stanza of the song shows her inability to forget the 'heartache.' She had met this acute suffering when her love went away. But this never-ending suffering comes back every day with something new for her. This has become an inseparable part of the everyday life. Needless to say, the sufferings for a black woman are primarily double-fold: sprouted from race and gender bias. They, in no way, get out of these bubbles of experiences. Third stanza of the song indicated the haunting attributes of the memories related to sufferings. This leads to the temporality of trauma, that the memory underpins. There is a tone of the lyric which indicates a space where the trauma is nothing new and this lessens the intensity of the suffering in the moment this is as expected.

She tries to tame the memories or trauma when she instructs this to 'sit down' and 'stop haunting.' Instead of a traumatic withdrawal, this language embraces the adversities in an aesthetic sphere that naturalizes the bias moments, but not complains. Ann Ronell (1905-1993) found it very difficult for a woman to break into the male-dominated field. Her 1932 song "Willow Weep for Me" was a bluesy pop gifted her the reputation as both composer and lyricist. Her another best-known song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" was used in 1933 Disney cartoon *Three Little Pigs* and this shows the

tremendous resistance as the lyrics was impregnated with. In "Willow Weep for Me," the author is personifying the willow while requesting it to weep for her and urging to hear her plea. She has explored her paucity of being in an emotional engagement while she seeks the willow to cry for her out of sympathy, so that her 'sighing' and 'crying' could not be heard. Her vulnerability she wants to keep under the sympathy she wants the willow to shower on her. Thematically, she wants to cover up her pains and sorrows that she experiences in her life which lets her express her woes but wants it to be hidden. In the stream of weeping of the willow tree, her cry will remain unnoticed. It somehow indicates the plight of an individual who wants to reveal this as a part of the collective plight. The collective helps the individual to hide her face; but she is a unit of the experience of the collective. If we explore the imageries and the metaphors from, "Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?" that too indicates how the author has put up her weaknesses and she is well aware how furious the opponent is. The narrator in the song builds her house with straw and hay. She plays on her flute but she never hoots. This again shows how she is tolerant of the situation! Metaphors like 'straw', 'hay', 'stick', 'twig', 'sticks' indicate the incompetence in the face of the powerful discourses prevalent within and beyond the community. While making the home with stronger elements (e.g., stone and brick) she can, no more sing and dance. It is explored that when she puts in more endeavour in making the walls stronger, she keeps herself aloof from the modes of entertainments. She is promising be safe and the opponent would feel sorry sometime. The lyric ends with a tone that strengthens her to be unabated in front of the 'big, bad wolf' while she marks herself as 'poor little sheep'. These contrasting metaphors explore the opposing power structures, which further relates to the dominance and submission. Though, here the lyricist's voice sharply puts up resistance, parallelly, when she admits the power differences. Without a complaint, she puts up the situation and gazes and how she is supposed to strengthen the walls of her house. This home-making is making of the 'I' that can face the 'other' in the relational framework.

Dorothy Fields had more than 400 lyrics and most of them were sung by eminent jazz singers. Her "The Way You Look Tonight" won Oscar for Best Song in 1936. Other than this, she wrote famous songs like "Exactly Like You," "On the Sunny Side of the Street," "I Can't Give you Anything but Love" and so on. In "I Can't Give You Anything but Love," she expresses that love is the only thing she has to offer. Love and happiness are the things she craves for. This prioritizes humanity in the face of the gender and race bias she has to experience. In "On the Sunny Side of the Street", she wishes to leave her worries on the doorstep. Embarking on the happy tune, she wants to dim the memory of plight which she has to face in a manifold within the everydayness. She urges not to get stuck in the shade and stand in the sunny side of the street.

5. Conclusion

Through the languages and exclusive use of literary devices, all these lyricists put up their voice to resist and to make the identity of the 'self' in relation to the other powerful discourses

in the society which offers the discriminatory paradigms accounting to the societal challenges for an individual. They indicate the brutality of the system when explore their position as a subject there. In turn, they never have a voice of complaint, but only the tone of humanity and embracing every difference within the powerful discourses.

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