

Womanism in Lucille Clifton's An Ordinary Woman

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Lucille Clifton is an accomplished and nationally-recognized African American poet and author of children fiction. Her writing contemplates on themes related to African American women and families. It has been celebrated that her pride as a black woman has helped her write positively about overthrowing the difficulties faced by women during her age. Clifton's poetry is expressive because the figures present a double vision of her characters and their placement. They are placed in an urban ghetto where, despite overcoming hardships, tough women survive and triumph. Clifton herself is one of these tough women. In *An Ordinary Woman*, her third collection of poetry increases to fill in the growing vessel of her awareness. The poems of these volumes are more intensely fixed in her own experience, her own self-understanding as a black woman. Themes related to sex, introduced in her book *An Ordinary Woman*, become essential dimensions of her poetic identity. This volume consists of two parts, "Sisters" and "I agree with the leaves." Many of the poems in this volume are devoted to her female family members and friends.

In *An Ordinary woman* Clifton has written many poems about women and also the book is about being a woman searching for self identity. Poems like "sisters," "leanna's poem," and "harriet" identify not only the affection, but also the mutual appreciation that like-minded women feel, whether blood sisters or not. In the second part of "sisters," she writes:

me and you
got babies
got thirty-five

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got black
 let our hair go black
 be loving ourselves
 be loving ourselves
 be sisters
 only where you sing
 i poet (14-23).

These sisters are strong and self-confident black women; the repetition of “be loving ourselves” explains their unashamed passion for who and they are. The last two lines have an amazing, alliteration sound to them after the poem’s differently constant waterfall of words. They indicate an identification of personality within the sisterhood. Extensively, the singer and poet have a creative and proficient relationship; they complement rather than oppose one another. The words “i poet” can be read as a dialect omission of “i am a poet” or, more provokingly as if “poet” were a verb similar to “sing.” In either case, the tension is on the artistic personality that flourishes in the spirit of sisterhood.

Memories of female family members and friends are important and entangled elements in her poetry. In “leanna’s poem” and “harriet,” Clifton recalls her friends, Leanna Webster, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and her own grandmother for inspiration. Confirmation also blends with affirmation in “leanna’s poem” and “harriet.” In the first one, the poet quotes her friend’s comment over lunch that “one /is never enough for me”(1-2). Her own intensions “about meals/ and mealmates and hunger”(6-7), lead her to acknowledge that her friend is correct:

and so this poem is for us,
 leanna, two hungry ladies,
 and I wish for you
 when I wish for myself
 more than one
 more than one
 more than one (11-17).

The repeated line “more than one” signifies the desire of the each “hungry lady.” It may be anything that more than one tasty treat,

more than one lover, or more than one great poem. May be the point is simply that it is better not to be all alone. The poet's affection for her friend is the reasonable expression of her love for herself.

Similarly, in "harriet" Clifton recognizes other women even as she determines what her own route in life will be. In comparison to "leanna's poem" and "sisters," she identifies with her grandmothers, both historical and genealogical rather than with women of her own period. In "harriet" she addresses Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and her grandmother: those were women rights activists, "if i be you"(2). She preferably contemplates herself as an activist, chasing social change in benefit of black people and women, patiently giving for future generations:

let me not forget to
work hard
trust the Gods
love my children and
wait (20-24).

The poem indicates that one character does not necessarily refuse the other. Each character needs patience and courage which the poet pursues to infuse within herself. She decides to bring changes in the life of black people especially in every black woman's life by remembering her friends and grandmothers in her poems.

The second section of *An Ordinary Woman*, "I agree with the leaves," has a ruminative, spiritual feel to it. The section consists of a series of poems about Kali, the frightening black Hindu goddess whom the poet considers a dangerously influential but not accurately evil spirit residing in her own body and soul. Through the figure of Kali, the all-powerful Great Women of Hindu mythology, the poet identifies her own essential need for nurturing – attentive aiming to the female self. For Clifton Kali's appeal is not very strange. Reflecting Clifton's growing interest in feminist spirituality, Kali is portrayed in her poems as a natural women force. Barbara G. walker writes as, "Only one aspect of the many-named, multiform Goddess. She was a truer image of the real world's variety and cyclic alternation than any of the images developed by patriarchy alone"(72). In one of her poem "Kali" Clifton explaining

Kali as “the permanent guest /within ourselves” (5-6) and “dread mother” (10). Through the image of goddess Kali Clifton discusses the inner power and strength of black women during her period.

For Clifton, womanhood is powerful and inspiring foundation for the individual self. In another poem “the coming of Kali,” she describes the terrifying black goddess as an unavoidable aspect of the black woman self:

it is the black God, Kali,
 a woman God terrible
 with her skull and breasts
 I am one side of your skin,
 she sings, softness is the other (1-5).

Kali’s “black terrible self”(10) compares extremely with the actual image of black womanhood. The two aspects of Kali’s powers of creativity and destruction express why she is beloved by women and why Clifton regards her with both fear and love. The goddess makes visible what many men fear in women and what many women fear in themselves. In Clifton’s poems, Kali becomes a metaphor for the needs and passion that women cannot easily express or decide. But she is also a bunch of negative emotions like dissatisfaction, rage, and fury that are all bound up in the culturally and biologically sophisticated role of women.

Clifton’s personal life gives encouragement for many poems about womanhood. There are many women in her verse, but they all contribute to the black woman’s self that is Clifton, just as her clearly personal poems present to our imagining of womanhood. Her poems call extensive identification across race and sex, though they are clearly about women, particularly black women. Clifton’s friend Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Women Born*:

We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create a new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence- a new relationship to the universe(292)

The next section of *An Ordinary Woman*, “i agree with the leaves” consists of “the thirty eighth year,” one of Clifton’s best known as well as the longest poems. It is a specific poem of womanhood, black female identity and Clifton’s own experience:

the thirty eighth year
of my life
plain as bread
round as a cake
an ordinary woman.
an ordinary woman
i had expected to be
smaller than this,
more beautiful,
wiser in afrikan ways,
more confident,
i had expected
more than this (1-13).

In the first stanza, Clifton declares her sex but not her race. The fragments look like personal, even arbitrary thoughts, but the imagery cleverly draws a woman in her kitchen, the “ordinary” woman’s kingdom.

The first one is homely and pleasant, since bread is life-sustaining and cakes are sweet. In the next stanza, the surprise and humor of the admission “i had expected to be /smaller than this”(7-8) come from the improbable syntax, but the remaining part assembled refrain indicates that this black woman is not without beauty or confidence, nor is she totally lacking in knowledge of Africa. This poem also recalls her “very wise / and beautiful / and sad”(22-24) mother, who died young. In the middle of the poem, Clifton straightly writes about her deceased mother, an inerasable presence in her poetry, and then implores the family’s new generation of women:

i have taken bones you hardened
and built daughters
and they blossom and promise fruit

like afrikan trees (32-35).

The final section of the poem appears as a concentration on inner strength rather than on weakness. By the time we read the words “an ordinary woman” for the fourth time in this poem’s conclusion, even this seemingly unexciting expression has taken on a bright decision. Aware of her compound identity as a daughter and mother, as a black woman, and as an independent, ambitious self, the “ordinary” woman can truly come into her own.

References

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