



Book Review

**Looking as an Art of Resistance: Reading Violence, Racism, and Gaze in
June Jordan's book *Who Look at Me* (1969), June Jordan**

Srijani Dutta

In my review essay, I will try to go for the postcolonial reading of June Jordan's book *Who Look at Me*. Jordan in her book *Who look at me* (1969) deals with the burning problems of racism, oppression fuelled by the pangs of colonialism and slavery. This is a work of dialogues between paintings and her instinctive reaction to the oppressive state of black skinned people in the white land of America. She focuses on the relation between 'self' and the racially oppressed 'others' through the use of argumentation, allusion, hyperbole, subtle references to history. By doing so, she sheds light on the power structures between the colonial and colonized people.

Jordan talks about the suffering of the black people who are oppressed only for their skin colour. The concrete or materialized body along with the particular names gives one the particular identity. Unfortunately, in the case of the black skinned people, the violence is done on their bodies to transform them into non-entities. The book starts with the question "Who would paint a people black or white?" (Jordan, 1969, p. 1). This is the question of longing as the poet persona wants to be looked at just the way she is. Later, the change in the tone qualifies itself as a tool of resistance against violence and injustice. The passive black body becomes the active black body, and it uninterruptedly looks at the bodies of oppressors without asking for any validation from them. It is their guilt free, gradual yet consistent attempt for 'writing back' as well as looking back at the empires. The politics of 'seeing' and 'looking' run through the nerves of this book. The painters mentioned in this book capture how the world looks at the black, ugly, distorted bodies. Interestingly, Jordan has transformed their invisibility into visibility, and their inaudible pain into protesting words inscribed in the book. To see colours, one needs to realize the meaning of colours; one has to have a colourful mind. The phrase 'white stare,' depicts the harsh reality faced by the black skinned people, "Is that how we look at you/ A partial nothing clearly real?" (Jordan, 1969, p. 4). They are stigmatized by their apparition, facial features such as 'darkly covered ribs,' 'black swollen neck.' She urges her son as well as the rest of the fellow black skinned people to recognize the 'prettiness' of the black girl and the 'grace' of a black boy only to decolonize the prejudiced definition of beauty and beautiful bodies. Even, denying one's culture, history and roots is a colonial stance, and evokes out the colonial mentality of the oppressors. Hence, the colour 'grey' metaphorically represents their violated existence, and this book indirectly tries to decolonise the idea of beauty and gaze.

In the book, the first painting *Manchild* by Charles Alston mirrors the stereotypical portraits of the African American people with broad nose. The Man is supposed to be the grown, mature person whereas the child is the immature one. But, the juxtaposition of man with child insinuates at the ironical existence of their lives. Sometimes, the white man's deliberate attempt to eradicate their existence and turn it into anonymity has been depicted in these lines "Anonymous and normal/ Parents and their offspring/ Posed in formal," (Jordan, 1969, p. 14) In this painting *Family*, we can easily observe the lesser known existence through the invisible hazy portraits of faces. Andrew Wyeth's *Garret Room* attacks the satirical gaze of the white skinned people who torment them for their skin colour "Look at the stranger as/ He lies more gray than black/ On that colorquilt (that everyone will say)/ Seems bright beside him" (Jordan, 1969, p. 18). In the Southern part of America, the black skinned people are

employed as workers in the sugar plantation to maintain the tradition of slavery and colonization. So, the paintings of their conventional occupations like harvester, sailor, and taxi driver visually record their daily lives furnished with violence. The market place is a space that eradicates all kinds of binaries, but this place is used to buy and sell the slaves. In the painting *The Slave Market*, we can see the depiction of kneeling down of the lady in front of the white skinned people, and how she spreads her arms around her child's body to prevent them from taking away her child. Her posture is a mark of resistance. Seeking for identity is a 'postcolonial' attempt made by the subjugated people. In the painting *Alexander Chandler*, Andrew Wyeth has shown a black man along with his poignant shadow. This picture breaks the stereotypes related to the brightness, visibility of the black men and their shadow. Edmund Archer's painting *The Black skinned woman* celebrates the active look of the colonially and racially oppressed. The painting of Banjo player asserts their protest through artistic medium as it alludes to the arousal and deep significance of Harlem Renaissance.

Postcolonial poetry deals with the experiences of the once colonized souls, their struggles, stories of exploitation, and through the narration of their past, the artists seek for assertion and preservation of their community and self. Colonialism is followed by slavery, and it gives birth to violence. Therefore, the postcolonial voices, in any way, try to counter and confront the attitudes of the colonizers. Looking itself is a way of asserting activeness, a form of resistance. Through the art of looking, one can exchange views as well as emotions. This book expresses anger as it hints at the culturally rich, long yet complicated history of colonialism and slavery. Like writing back to the empires, she emphasises on looking back at those figures who have projected violence on her people, and made them feel invisible. In this regard, the names of Audrey Lorde, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes and others are worth mentioning for speaking against exploitation and violence. Most of their works deal with anger as the outcome of violent exploitation. In the essay *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*, Alice Walker (1983) tells how the act of practicing the artistic enterprises helps her former generation to release their agony by telling their stories. The metaphor of garden in her essay insinuates at her predecessors who have carved and smoothened the path for protesting against colonialism and slavery. Similarly, the artistic practices done by her fellow ones mentioned in Jordan's book create the communal feelings. Another rebellious voice, Lorde (1981) in her essay *The Usages of Anger* utters- "My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, on that anger, beneath that anger, on top of that anger, ignoring that anger, feeding upon that anger, learning to use that anger before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life." (p. 7) She also believes that anger is the natural, most spontaneous emotion coming from soul due to "exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and coopting." (p. 7)

Gradually and positively, Jordan (1969) has turned fear, inferiority and negative emotion of the oppressed colour into strength "I am black alive and looking back at you." (p. 31) She describes America as 'hungerland' for not feeding her own black skinned people properly. They are hungry for the freedom, and accepting their blackness is the first step to decolonize their soul- "The jail is white where I was born but black will bail me out." (Jordan, 1969, p. 45) Little by Little, she encourages all to feel ignited, optimistic as their seed like body is full of possibilities to bring about a change in the mindset of the surroundings. To her, black is equivalent to energy. Black brings rain; black produces food, but these black people live in a small place with little security. She uses her history along with the history of that African chef, his freedom to encourage her readers to dream. At the same time, she makes aware of her people of the rich yet complicated history of colonialism, slavery, exploitation in the plantation. Her book becomes the historiographical study, a detailed artistic manifesto for reclaiming past and watering present and future. From being the passive, mutilated objects to becoming the active lookers, she records their journey "In part we grow/ By looking back at you/ That white terrain impossible for black America to thrive" (p. 66). Like a 'broken mast,' they are sailing their ships with a tinge of hope in their heart and prayer. From facing identity crisis expressed in the lines "I am impossible to explain/ Remote from old and new interpretations/ And yet/ Not exactly." (p. 17) to the renewal of identity evoked out in the expressions "Who see the roof and corners of my pride/ To be (as you are) free?" (p. 91) She undergoes the psychological, cultural and historical journey of memory of violence.

References

Jordan, J. (1969). *Who look at Me*. Cromwell Publication.

Lorde, A. (1997). The Uses of Anger. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 25(1/2), 278–285.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40005441>

Nayar, P. K. (2008). *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson.

Walker, A. (1983). *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publication.

Bio-note

Srijani Dutta has completed her Post Graduation in English literature from Visva Bharati University. She loves reading books and expressing herself through colours, words, and images. She writes poetry and has published her poems in the journals like Setu, Parcham, Contemporary Literary Review India, Story Mirror, EKL review journal etc. While she is not writing, she paints. Her paintings have been published in borderless journal, Creative chromosomes. She also likes balancing her life between the world of research and her creative practices. She has an Instagram account where she uploads her painting.

Email Id: srijanidutta081@gmail.com

