

THE POET AS A CREATOR OF SOCIAL VALUES

by Sonia Sanchez

I. The Development of Social Values and the Birth of the Poet

Social values spring from human interaction with the environment and are the resultant perception of that experience. The environment of man is all the suggestions which surround the mind and impact it as it pursues human survival, awareness, understanding of itself, its place in society and the universe. Environmental suggestions include nature and its creatures, climate, habitat, the ideas and words of people. *Environmental suggestions around the mind create impressions within the mind* from which the social personality is formed.

The collective experience of people who interact with the same environment form a world view, i.e., a version of life by which the significance of all thought and action by members of the society are weighed.

This world view emerges first in the language and symbol and then in all of society's institutions. But with the birth of symbol, the birth of the poet is presaged. A symbol, for our purposes, is an arbitrary representative of reality, visual or spoken, emanating from a group experience by which that reality is cloaked as well as revealed.

The symbol cloaks reality from those outside the experience and reveals reality on different levels of intensity to those within the experience. For example, the sun is a universal symbol; the three leaf clover a more parochial one.

Language itself, in a broad sense, is a symbol of the thought interaction

experience of a people, although it is designed primarily to communicate experiences in fundamental ways. *Poetry on the other hand, is the symbol or essence of language designed to sensitize meaning, motivate, create or recreate experience and bestow a state of perception not ordinarily experienced or not experienced in an ordinary way.*

The poet then, even though he/she speaks plainly, is a manipulator of symbols and language – images which have been planted by experience in the collective subconscious of a people. Through this manipulation, he/she creates new or intensified meaning and experience whether to the benefit or detriment of his/her audience. *Thus Poetry is a subconscious conversation: it is as much the work of those who understand it and those who make it.*

The power that the poet has to create, preserve or destroy social values, depends greatly on the quality of his/her social visibility and the functionary opportunity available to poetry to impact lives. Like the priest and the prophet (with whom she/he was often synonymous), the poet in some societies has had infinite powers to interpret life; in others his/her voice has been drowned out by the winds of mundane pursuits.

II. The First Poets in Ancient Society and the Crystallization of Symbols

Art, no matter what its intention, reacts to or reflects the culture it springs from. But from the very beginning two types of poetry developed. One can be called the *Poetry of Ethos* because it was meant to convey

personal experience: feelings of love, despair, joy, frustration arising from very private encounter; the other, *Functionary Poetry* dealt with themes in the social domain: religion, God, country, work, social institutions, social problems, war, family, marriage and death in the distinct context of that society's perception.

GOD, THE RIVER AND THE SUN

Poetry's oldest formal ties were with religion. Man's first civilizations, it must be remembered, were theocratic and therefore religiously inspired. Thus were the ancient Black civilizations of the Nile, Mesopotamia, the Indus River and Meso-America societies in which religion as a *social vector*, not as ritual, exerted a prime force that motivated human action consciously and unconsciously.

The moral and materialistic were not antagonists, science and religion not incongruous. Thus the pyramid as a fitting symbol of the social charter embodied science and of religion as two eyes seeing one vision. A man developing sight into insight, taste into discrimination, feeling into awareness, could become a god and in becoming godlike became a greater servant of God.

The poet-priests of ancient society (Egypt, India, Mesopotamia) are examples of men/women who had the power to interpret life for the society. The poet and priest were synonymous. The priest as poet devoted him/herself to developing symbols of collective experience into teaching tools that inculcated the social values and wisdom of the culture and conveyed the nature of being and the interrelationship between man, God and the universe.

In time, the critical wisdom of India, Mexico, Egypt were all in poetic symbols: i.e., seals, picture writing and the coded symbols of hieroglyphics [priest (hiero) – writing (glyphics)] which only the priests themselves could interpret. Knowing their position, the priests politicized interpretation; and poetry originally seen as a teaching device became an instrument of political manipulation. This is exemplified promi-

nently by the political struggle between Ikhnaton, the monotheistic pharaoh of Egypt, and the priests of Amon-Ra over the true poetic meaning of Egypt's religious symbols.

III. The Crystallization of Symbols

*I*t can safely be said that nearly 90 percent of the interracial and inter-sexual image/controversies of our time, involve poetic manipulation of poetic symbols used in ancient times but which have become grossly distorted out of their original context. The issues of racism and sexism specifically arose from the manipulation of color symbolism in ancient scriptural poetry, and the sexual roles assigned to things in the natural order by religious poets.

For example, the primordial idea that earth was a female or woman, i.e., Mother Earth or Mother Nature, arose from the observation-analogy that the earth produced new life, in the same mysterious way that female creatures gave birth to new life. Since the sun and rain that seemingly sparked earthly vegetation came from the sky, the sky, sun and rain were seen as male or masculine, i.e., Father Sky. These concepts evolved into the doctrine of the masculine-feminine principle of the Egyptian Hermetic System which stated: "The universe is masculine and feminine," i.e., the pattern of dominant and recessive interaction is a pervasive aspect of the nature of being.

This simple poetic teaching deteriorated into socialized sexism through calculated interpolation. Since Father Sky was above Mother Earth, the male was to be spiritually and socially above the female; since mother earth and women carried new life, vessels of transports (ships, wagons, carts) were called "she" and women were not to be seen as initiators of social action, only as the supporters of actions initiated by men.

Since storms and natural disasters were seen as the work of Mother Nature, images of women were assigned to them, and images of women were used to explain how evil crept, entered the world, just as stealthily as a storm steals the stillness of afternoon. Enter Eve, Pandora's Box, etc.

Since God and Knowledge were associated with masculine sun and sky, women would be seen as vessels of earthly pleasure and emotion, i.e., creatures of earth not of God when compared to men. These poetic analogies backed by uncoded Biblical images and feminine personifications like Jezebel, Pontiphar's wife and Eve have led to long standing miscreant social values about women's roles being that of sex objects.

ORIGINS OF BLACK AND WHITE POETIC SYMBOL

But nowhere is the power of the poet as a creator of social values so presaged as in the evolution of the dialectics surrounding the colors, black and white. These dialectics which were originally used to inculcate metaphysical truth were later manipulated as a weapon of political and racial hegemony. Again, however, the black and white poetic symbology arose from universal environmental experience.

The fact that men/women early in history associated progress with the sun (light), danger and evil with darkness and the night, stemmed from universal primitive experience. During the day man/woman was given a gift of visibility and therefore the ability to pursue survival, enhancement and greater understanding of him/herself and the world.

With night came immobility, fear of predators, and the unknown afforded by non-visibility, weakness of limbs, and sleep – the unavoidable simulation of death. Thus the sun or light was associated with good, divinity, knowledge, moral and intellectual development, wealth, prosperity and power. The night was associated with death, evil, immorality, weakness and mystery. Carried to color symbolism extremes, God and purity were associated with white; evil and defeat with Black.

Pyramid poems of the oldest origin exuded the light-dark white-black motif pervasively and are found in five pyramids dating from before 2180 B.C. African proverbs likewise and Indic texts also are filled with this symbolism but nowhere is it applied to skin color before 1500 B.C., the

advent of the Indo-European (Aryan) invasion of India.

Prior to 1500 B.C. in India, and 587 B.C. in Babylonia, Black and White were purely metaphysical terms. From Egypt a pyramid poem excerpt reads, "Praise to thee, Thou Eye of Horus, (the sun) White and great, over whose beauty the Ennead of Gods rejoice, when thou riseth in the Eastern horizon. They that are in what Shu (the atmosphere) upholdeth adore thee . . . men fear thee; the foreign peoples bow down before thee upon their faces and the Nine Bows, bow their heads to thee."

From East Africa a proverb: "The friendship between two wives of the same husband is like dye water, always black." Motto: no two wives can be sincere to each other.

IV. India: A Civilization Conquered by Poetry

The Aryan caste system of India affords history's earliest example of the poet's ability to create social values. The Aryans (Indo-European barbarian-nomads kin to the Hyksos Shepherd Kings and Hittites who conquered Egypt and Mesopotamia) in the second millenium B.C. invaded India, but were unsuccessful in defeating altogether the Black Dravidians-Harrapa civilization militarily so they conquered it by poetry.

Specifically, a tribe of Aryan priest-poets called the Bharatas who were responsible for conducting Aryan religious services and sacrifices, infiltrated the Dravidian Hindu religion and manipulated the black and white symbolism into poems espousing their cause and which showed their god Indra – a white skinned blonde haired blue eyed sky god – as victorious over the indigenous black people whom they designated as demon "dasa" (slaves).

This they fostered upon the people of Northern India whom they subjugated. This was accompanied by a caste system called varna – meaning color – in which Brahman, a pure Aryan, constituted the head of society, its priests and warriors, while the

Sudras (Blacks) were the feet, the untouchables or slaves of society.

So the poetry of the Vedas, Hindu sacred poems, called Blacks "children of darkness" or evil and depicted a white god defeating them: "Indra who made subject the dasa color; to him goes the morning juice active and bright like bulls driving the black skin far away, quelling the Dasas upon the bridge of bliss, leaving the bridge of woe far behind."

One thousand years after the Vedas, this motif entered Jewish literature as the Hamitic Myth (537 B.C.). One thousand years after the Hamitic Myth of the Talmud (1500's A.D.), this poetic theme of white divinely-authorized superiority over Black became an instinctive social value in the West and intellectually financed the Atlantic Slave trade (more properly called the European Slave trade) between Africa, Europe and the New World.

It is truly amazing that after such an intense period of indoctrination, 4,000 years for Western whites and 400 years for African Blacks (regarding the myth of superiority and inferiority) that the Black poets in a short decade of the 60s could convince anyone that "Black is beautiful." Their success however was closely tied to parallel religious movements with which they were contemporary – specifically, the diametrically positioned Martin Luther King and Elijah Muhammad movements on which the era was focused.

The fall of Black civilization to the sword of Alexander, the Aryans (and other representatives of Europe) and its subsequent replacement by Greece, Rome, Christian mercantilism and Calvinistic imperialism respectively, led to the replacement of a whole venue of social values by a new version of man/woman's life on earth.

In this transformation, the poet played no small part. Black civilizations: Egypt, India, etc., had defined man/woman as in the world journeying toward godhood and toward life in the hereafter. Human excellence and devotion, moral and intellectual were the *currency of transformation* and final reckoning.

In the subsaharan civilization of West and East Africa, life was a quest for unity with *nature and tradition*. Traditional African poetry then was distinguished by its romantic affinity with nature and the African's relationship to his/her folklore, his/her mythology and his/her native culture. It was and is poetry best exemplified through oral expression which incorporates the rituals, songs and lifestyles indigenous to the African's way of life.

Western man had chosen to *define his status in the universe by things accumulated, conquered and fought for, the things that his right hand possessed*. Thus Alexander the Great, believing that Hercules was his ancestor, expressed great indignation at his father's victorious campaigns: "Father," he said, "would you conquer the whole world and leave me nothing?"

This statement belies the whole insecure obsession of the West with divine materialism; i.e., *the idea that progress was ownership and that conquest was the evidence of superiority over others*. Victory, to this mentality, showed not only that God was on their side but that God rather was one of them. The *raison d'être* of white racism is the wishfulfilling idea that God is a white man, and whites are "chosen people" to be rulers on the earth.

These developments led to two types of poetic expression that profoundly fueled different social, white and black values: The Poetry of Conquest and the Poetry of Resistance.

The Poetry of Conquest can perhaps be exemplified by Lord Tennyson's poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" which would be better named "The Charge of the White Brigade" – "Into the valley of death rode the 600." They didn't win but they were morally victorious because they were white and the enemy was anyone from the Third World.

V. African and African-American Poetic Resistance to Imperialistic Social Values

African and African-American resistance to the imposition of imperialistic social values were different but equally intense.

African-American Blacks – enslaved and disarmed of African culture – wrestled relentlessly to identify themselves. Given only the world view of slave masters as reality, they sometimes accommodated that reality with the hope of being treated fairly; or they protested or revolted against it demanding the blessing of equal rights and positive self-definition or they sought to escape it in folktales, songs and poems of fantasy which depicted the master-type being outwitted by the slave-type.

Accommodational poems such as those of Phyllis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar emphasized survival as a social value for African-Americans. Survival often meant pretended or affected agreement with reality as written by the master, but it also meant the exploitation of that agreement for the benefit of the slave.

“**T**was mercy brought me from my pagan land, taught my benighted soul to understand Remember, Christians, Negroes, Black as Cain, may be refined and join the angelic train,” wrote Phyllis Wheatly.

Protest poems, though often angry, appealed to some sense of assumed decency in the logos of the master. It sought to shame him or threaten him with the moral consequences of his oppression. Protest poems upheld and instilled social values of moral courage in the black cause. Frances Harper’s poem, “Bury Me in a Free Land,” and George Moses Horton’s poem, “On Liberty in Slavery,” are representative of this theme. “Alas and am I born for this/ to wear this slavish chain/ Deprived of all created bliss/ through hardship toil and pain!/ How long have I in bondage lain/ and languished to be free!/ Alas and must I still complain/ Deprived of Liberty.”

ESCAPE POEMS

Escape poems were poems that projected themes of freedom, within slavery afforded by wit and manipulation; stealing away to Jesus or waiting on religious deliverance. The Brer Rabbit tales and the poetic lyrics in hymns like “Go Down Moses”

are examples of escape poetry which sought to instill the social values of wit and patience in Afro-Americans, during ante-bellum slavery.

In Africa where culture and language remained intact, poets instilled social values of ethnic pride in the face of white supremacy. Chief among early apologists of Black ethnic pride were East African Islamic poets who wrote in swahili: “Said the darkskinned Yumma to one whose/ color equals the whiteness of the eye:/ Why should your face boast of its white/ complexion? Do you think that by so pale/ a tint it gains additional merit? Were a/ mole of my color on your cheek it would/ adorn it, but one of your color on my cheek/ would disfigure me.”

Here is another by Yumma: “Blackness misbecomes you not, by it/ you are increased in beauty; black is/ the color of princes. Were you not/ mine I would purchase you with all my/ wealth. Did I not possess you,/ I should give my life to obtain you.”

During the 1920s and 1960s, the role of the poet as a creator of social values was dramatically demonstrated. The themes of accommodation, protest and escape were changed to themes of self-acceptance and love, self-confirmation and self-determination, the theme of redemption through the historical awareness of past African glory; the theme of ethnic pride based on black life style and echoes of Marcus Garvey, formed the poetry of the New Negro 1920–1933.

The poetry of Langston Hughes, Anne Spencer and Georgia Douglas Johnson glorified what Blacks had hitherto been ashamed of. The awareness of the 1920’s Harlem Renaissance period is best expressed in the Langston Hughes’ poems *Rivers* and *Brothers*: “I’ve known rivers:/ I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins./ I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young./ I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep./ I looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids above it./ I heard the singing of the Mississippi/ when Abe Lincoln went down/ to New Orleans, and I’ve seen

Ironically, however, the Black poetic visibility that allowed them to be impactful was financed by white money; the depression knocked out that money, that visibility and to a certain extent that awareness.

BLACK TO BEAUTIFUL

In the 1960's, the question of Black identity was addressed head on by Elijah Muhammad and his spokesman Malcolm X. The turning of black to beautiful was due to the theology of Elijah Muhammad's version of Islam which came into prominence in 1959. Black replaced white in that cosmology as the origin of good in the world and white replaced Black as the source of all evil. Thus Allah replaced Jesus or god, Black replaced Negro, self-sufficiency replaced dependency as the labels of reality.

Through the charisma and intellect of Malcolm X and the overwhelming prophetic significance of the rival King movement, Black pride emerged as a social value on the lips of poets, in the lyrics of musicians, in its muddy bosom turn/ all golden in the sunset./ I've known rivers:/ Ancient, dusky rivers./ My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

In *Brothers* he wrote, "We're related you and I/ You from the West Indies/ I from Kentucky / You from Africa/ I from the U.S.A./ Brothers you and I."

And in *Black Woman* by Johnson and Spencer: "Don't knock at my door, little child/ I cannot let you in./ You know not what a world this is/ of cruelty and sin./ Wait in the still eternity/ until I come to you./ The world is cruel, cruel, child./ I cannot let you in!/ Don't knock at my door, little one./ I cannot bear the pain/ of turning deaf-ear to your call/ time and time again!"

Or in *Courier*: "Where are the brave men?/ Where are the strong men?/ Pygmies rise and spawn the earth./ Weak-kneed, weak-hearted and afraid!/ Afraid to face the counsel of their timid hearts./ Afraid to look men squarely —/ Down they gaze/ with fatal fascination —/ Down/ Down/ Into the whirling maggot-sands/ of prejudice."

the environmental trappings of Black life from hairdos to sandals, from jazz or Black/classical music to Kwanza.

A Black Aesthetic emerged which took identity from the Black Nationalist movement of E. Muhammad and others. A chief characteristic of this new awareness was the changing of names to African and Islamic ones, e.g., Leroi Jones became Amiri Baraka, Don L. Lee became Haki Madhubuti, Roland Snellings became Askia M. Touré, and Jewel Lattimore became Johari Amini, etc.

Perhaps characteristic as any of the poetic process of instilling black social value in the 60's is this poem by Bobb Hamilton, *Poem to A Nigger Cop*: Hey there polece/ Black skin in blue mask/ You really gonna uphold the law?/ What you gonna do when you see/ Your mama/ running down 125th St. with/ A T.V. set tied in a bandana trying to catch a train to/ Springfield Gardens?/ You mean to tell me you gonna/ Bang your own mother?/ Bang! Bang!/ I can see you now grinning/ a big black no nuts nigger/ on channel no. 5/ Your teeth rolling across the screen/ Like undotted dice/ talking about how you "upheld/ De law"/ While Mr. Charlie sticks his white/ finger up your ass/ And pins a little gold medal on your chest!/ And then you'll bust out into soft shoe shuffle/ While a background chorus sings/ "God Bless America,"/ With an Irish Accent.

VI. African Combat Poetry

Since the emergence of African liberation movements in the early sixties, the poetry of colonized countries took a sharp turn to revolutionary expression. This is not to imply that traditional African poetry never reflected revolutionary values.

Discontent with colonialism can be seen in early African writings but never with a clear functional message of self-determination as expressed in the 60's. The poetry of African liberation movements is social value-making at work. It is neither tribal, nor romantic, nor protest in form. Instead, it instills political consciousness that directs masses in

specific ways of resistance against oppression.

"Black Cry" (a poem by a Mozambican, Jose Craveirinha) displays the unadulterated social value of self-determination: *I Am Black!* "I am coal, and must burn/ and consume everything/ everything in the fire of/ my combustion./ Yes, boss/ I will be your coal!"

"*Sun of our Freedom*" written by Mozambican poet Jorge Rebelo illustrates inculcated purpose of functional revolutionary poetry: Forge simple words/ that even the children can/ understand/ words which will enter/ every house/ like the wind/ and fall/ like red hot embers/ on our people's souls./ In our land/ bullets are beginning to flower." Jorge's words on the function of poetry sounds much like those of Karenga's *thesis on Black Cultural Nationalism*.

Perkins in his thesis on African poetry points out six characteristics of African liberation poetry. It is:

- (1) *Functional* – It relates directly to the people's struggle therefore, becomes a living voice which echoes their past defeats and victories.
- (2) *Inspirational* – It inspires the people to continue against oppression and serves as a catalyst to help build.
- (3) *Educational* – It teaches the people what the struggle is and why it must continue if liberation is ever to be won.
- (4) *Instructional* – It prescribes specific instructions which help the people in their struggle.
- (5) *Ideological* – It embraces the political ideology which the struggle is based upon.
- (6) *Political* – It fosters greater national consciousness and solidarity among the people.

The 70's was a decade of decision and dismantling of rhetoric and a search for tangible values. To a certain extent, black consciousness of the 60's was eroded in the 70's. This would be good if that consciousness became instead of rhetoric a subconsciousness motivating behavior and part of

the natural rhythm of black life. To the extent that it has become subconscious it has benefited Blacks as well as whites.

VII. Black Value Setting in the 1980's

The Poet as lyricist may well occupy center stage in the 1980's. In the 1980's, black value setting may well be a struggle between subliminal seduction of black moral strength presented by poetic lyrics of songs: Disco Lady, Le Freak, Move Your Boogie Body, Ooo Wee She's Killing Me, Breaking the Funk, I'm a Nasty Girl, ad nauseum, and a new movement to instill positive black family and social values.

No where in the annals of man's hypnotism or suggestology have such a massive undermining of the moral fabric of a people been so undertaken as in today's music industry. Record lyrics through repetition and rhythm are producing hypnotic behavior which is contrary to human development and self-contemplation producing moral schizophrenics and escapism through drugs. "They" are trying to insure that black youth do not grow-up able to face the real world. The "they" I speak of is a small group of people-imperialists who would manipulate the masses – Black and white – to a weakened state so as to consolidate complete control over the society.

Poets need to become moral psychologists in the 1980's. The struggle between man/woman and the inhumanitarians has escalated into the sophisticated realm of suggestion and behavior modification. A word to the wise is sufficient! □



