
**Women Empowerment Concept in Afro-American poetry: A Study in
Lucille Clifton's Selected poems**

**Key Words: Black Woman, Empowerment, identity, Equality, Strength,
superwoman.**

Asst. Inst. Asma Fuad Ahmed

Middle Technical University

AL-Rusafaa Management Institute

asmafuad1992@gmail.com

Abstract

This research aims at investigating an important concept in the poetry of contemporary Afro-American women poets, that is of Black Woman empowerment. The research offers a brief exploration of this concept, defining it and showing the reasons behind its appearances. Then, the research goes into examining this concept in Lucille Clifton's selected poems. The paper sheds light on the multiple poetic strategies on which Clifton depends to stir the concept of Black women empowerment in her poems. Most prominent of these empowering strategies are: showing the physical bodily features of Afro-American women as an assertion of their own identity, exposing the strength and endurance of Black women via reviving models of strong Black women in myths and history, as well as demonstrating the super women role of Black mothers and their ability to continue living even in the midst of trials.

Introduction:

The term empowerment is originally used in the "United States during the civil rights movement in the 1950s up to the 1960s." (Hiremath,15) Then, it evolves to be a dominating concept of a wide range of intellectual, social, economic and political realms of the 21st century. Whitmore defines it as:

... an interactive process through which people experience personal and social change, enabling them to take action to achieve influence over the organisations and institutions which affect their lives and the communities in which they live (13).

In relation to feminists' movements, the concept of empowerment is used to stir women's development, and to enable them to resist gender inequalities. It is described as the "process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices" (Kulkarni,30). Commenting on the reasons behind the appearances of women empowerment, in his book, *Women and Empowerment: Approaches and Strategies*, Sushama Sahay claims that the continued "inequality and vulnerability of women in all

sectors-economic, social, political, education, health care, nutrition and legal” (Sahay,9) are the stirring motives behind the arousal of this concept. He proposes that “as women are oppressed in all spheres of life, they need to be empowered in all walks of life” (Sahay,9) .

To put it differently, women empowerment is a process by which women are given the chance to participate entirely in political, social and economic spheres of life, (Sushama,1998). Empowering woman maintains establishing an enabling setting in which women are permitted to carry out the policies of government’s institutions and programs that influence their lives. It is a process by which women transform from the condition of being oppressed to a condition in which both “the oppressor and the oppressed are equal, socially, politically and economically” (Chattopadhyay, 2005).

Thus, women empowerment is all about treating women as fully human. It is about women’s “gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power, developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one’s ability to secure desired changes and the right to control” their “life”(Sarkar,32). In his book, *Towards Equality: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Womens Empowerment*, Dr. Pragati offers a comprehensive elaboration on what Women Empowerment means. He writes:

Empowerment means a psychological sense of personal control or influence and concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights. It is a multi-level construct referring to individuals, organizations and community. It is an international, ongoing process centred in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to control over these resources (179).

As a reflection of its age, contemporary poetry demonstrates a growing awareness of this concept, “Women Empowerment”. I.e., Women Empowerment finds its way in poems of a great wave of Afro-American women poets, who are actually inspired by an artistic movement, Black Arts Movement. Originally, Black Arts Movement was “an African-American- led art movement, active during the 1960s and 1970s” (Lyimo, 2016). Artists of this movement in general, and poets in particular, applied the concept of empowerment to shed light on “the elimination of laws which separate black African-Americans from white Americans”(Lyimo, 2016).

Consequently, female poets of this movement contemplate on being black and female. Their foremost desire is to enable black women of their own race to speak up against two main ideological folds of the American society: patriarchal ideology and white feminist Eurocentric ideology. The first undermines black-skinned race, positioning them in the last rank of social ladder, treating them as slaves and sexual machines. Whilst the second intends to silence the black women and extirpate black female writers from the mainstream literary tradition (Zid.13).

Black feminist poets adopts unfamiliar strategic concepts of dark-skinned women in their poems to evoke poetic resistance. Women empowerment concept is one of the most powerful strategies which is manipulated by Afro-American female poets to force women of their own race to go up through a journey “from erasure to presence, from margins to the centre, from absence to self-representation, from mute voices to interventional speech acts—from histories to ‘her’ stories” (Purkayastha,13).

Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) is one of the best representative female poets of Black Artistic Movement (Maulana,2021) . She is one of “the most lauded, original, and beloved African American poets of the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (De Roche,37). Clifton is a New York born woman of African origin. She married in 1958 and gave birth to six daughters and sons. She was given the title “poet laureate of Maryland in 1974”(Finkelman,441) and was recruited into “the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame in 1993” (Finkelman,441). In 1998, Clifton was inducted into the Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of “African descent” (Finkelman,441).

Clifton lived during “a time when African-Americans were excluded from many of the amenities of American life” (Maulana,2021). This is why, her poetry gives an authentic portrayal of “the black women of America whose most difficult challenge was to deal with their private trauma and suffering caused by white men abuses” (Bonta,146). She reflects the crisis of the women of her own descent who were living in America. Clifton uncovers the inequality and belittlement from which a great number of diasporic Black women suffered from in the United State of America. Clifton encourages the Afro-American women to “break the silence” and “speak out” (Overbeck, 2019) against racism, sexism and gender’s discrimination of the American society. She, like the majority of her contemporary Black female poets, draws on various poetic concepts of resistance. Her desire is to urge “dark-skinned” women to stand against “white racism and Western hegemony”(Zid,14).

The empowerment of Black-women is the most prominent concept in this direction. Clifton perceives that the process of empowering and strengthening “dark-skinned” women is an important step in Afro-American’s resisting act against the oppression of the white. She advocates such concept in her poems via a wide range of interrelated thematic poetic strategies. Among these strategies are: the assertion of identity, the re-creation of historical and mythical strong Black women model and the examination of superwoman role in relation to her motherly role and her personal endurance capacity to keep going on even in crises.

The assertion of identity is the first strategy which Clifton employs to empower the women of her own race. The physical bodily traits of Afro-America females is identified with their racial identity, and it is exploited to empower them to stand against hegemony of the white Americans. In relation to this, Emilia Tetty Harjani claims that, in her poems, Clifton reflects on black women’s response to

their biological features of their bodies. She urges them to feel “that their selves are worthy,” despite their distinct biological traits which are condemned by the social standards of the American society. Such feeling “plays an important role in empowering” those dark-skinned women, and helps them “to solve their problems.”(37). Putting it differently, Clifton’s poems do not romanticise women’s physical bodies in the same way that male poets have done for centuries. Clifton manages to break with such common view, shedding light on the physical traits of black women in the American society as a site of strength and resistance. She presents the biological traits of Afro-American females as an indication of their worth, power and identity.

In her collection of poems, *Two-Headed Woman* (1980), Clifton writes many poems whose theme is praising parts of her body that are traditionally demeaned by the white American’s norms of beauty. The collection has many “homage” poems. Clifton calls the first part of the poems in this collection as homage to her (Maulana,2021). For instance, in "homage to my hair", Clifton praises the beauty of her wavy hair, presenting it as a motto for her identity, power and worth. she writes:

This hair is auburn with golden strands.
 This hair has waves,
 like the ocean on a hot summer day.
 This hair can’t be tamed,
 with just one bobby pin.
 This hair has a mind of her own.
 She has my back and I have hers.
 This hair has been through a lot,
 dyed, straightened, and always returns with frizz. (THW.,1-9)

Thus, in this homage, Clifton manages to empower black women via defying the designed white American’s standards of beauty. Clifton’s short homage, “focuses on changing the meaning of blackness by transforming the language and images linked with nappy hair” (Bennett & Dickerson, 133). In other words, instead of talking about her hair as a defect, Clifton links it with words that have positive connotations, such as: “thick”, “strong” and “cannot be tamed.” In relation to this, Joyce Johnson claims that Clifton’s verbs in this poem "capture the character and vitality of nappy hair; together with the word music, they present images we readily associate with celebration, and thus, operate on two levels, as description and exultation." (Holladay,2012).

Clifton ends her poem skillfully, as she presents an empowered Black woman who is proud of her hair, a metaphor which indicates that she is proud of race and gender(Holladay,2012). Clifton closes her poem saying:

This hair is thick.
 This hair is strong.
 The different sizes of ringlets,
 emit the smell of coconut and vanilla.

Either always in braids,
 Or trailing down my back.
 Flyaways, split ends, and windswept,
 Yet told she's so luxuriant.
 I have known her
 to make others jealous,
 and me crazy. (THW.,10-20)

Similarly, in "Homage to my Hips", Clifton praises the physical features of her body, hips in this poem. Instead of feeling shy of her own hips and submitting to the restraints of beauty of the white American society, Clifton proudly describes her big hips, a conventionally demeaned bodily feature by the white Americans. Clifton presents her hips as indicators of her Afro-American identity. She presents them as sites of empowerment. The positive image which Clifton reveals of her big hips, urges the Afro-American females to revolve against the hegemonic forces and traditional norms of beauty designed by the white Americans. The poem opens with a black Afro-American female who openly discusses her body in a positive manner:

these hips are big hips
 they need space to
 move around in.
 they don't fit into little
 petty places. . . . (THW.,1-5)

The above lines, demonstrate that the poem's persona has big hips. During the 1960-80s, when this poem was composed and published, big hips were a condemned bodily traits by the societal norms of the white Americans. (Maulana,2021) Yet, the poem's persona does not seem to be upset that her hips are "big". Instead she embraces them and speaks of them proudly, claiming that these "big hips" endow her strength and power. They are symbols of her black feminist identity. She asserts that, over years, having big hips is used to be a feature of those black females. She continues saying:

. . . these hips
 are free hips.
 they don't like to be held back.
 these hips have never been enslaved,
 they go where they want to go
 they do what they want to do.
 these hips are mighty hips.
 these hips are magic hips. (THW., 5-12)

The black female speaker of this poem admits that she does not have an ideal beautiful body. Yet she is proud of it. She liberates herself from the dominance of the pre-established ideals of beauty: the masculine concepts of femininity of the white American society. To put it differently, throughout this short poem, Clifton succeeds in empowering black women via using a confident and powerful tone in presenting her big hips. She employs many powerful phrases to describe her hips such as: “magic hips,” “mighty hips” and “put a spell on a man.” These phrases obviously tell the reader of the persona’s power and strength of manipulation. I.e., via describing how her hips move in the world with magic, power and even seduction, Clifton’s persona asserts that she is not obsessed with how the hips look, but in the way they act (Maulana,2021). The character Clifton portrays through this poem is a woman of action: a woman who does not “like to be held” (7). She wants to move freely through the world, just as free as her hips.

In the last three lines, Clifton changes the poem to a first person perspective and concludes, “i have known them/ to put a spell on a man and/ spin him like a top!” (THW.,13-15). She completely moves to empowerment over men. Clifton realizes that men may always be the chief, however women can control and manipulate him into doing anything they desire. She ends her poem with a simile, she says: “spin him like a top” (T.H.W.,15). This simile implies that the big hips of Black women have ability to seduce and manipulate men. Thus, the big hips of Black females become a signifier of African identity, power, control and visibility.

Not so far from “Homage to My Hair,” and “Homage to My Hips” is Clifton’s “What the mirror said”. The poem again appears in her 1980 collection, *Two-Headed Woman*. It is viewed as a testimony to a “self-love” and “self-worth”(Maulana,2021). It, once again, shows Clifton’s success in urging the black females of her race to affirm their power and strength via having firm love for the physical shape as an assertion of their African identity. She presents the bodily traits of Black females as a manifestation of their power, self-worth and identity. Actually, this poem, “What the mirror said”, is inspired by a visit Clifton made to her husband, who was teaching at Harvard university. During that visit, Clifton looked around the “campus” and she noticed that “everyone there was eighteen, except” her. Clifton felt a kind of estrangement as everybody there was young and thin. Hence, Clifton decided to write a poem about “being a woman in a world of girls.” (Holladay,2012)

In this poem, Clifton “celebrates her beauty and strength instead of flaw,”(52) as Linda Christensen writes. Christensen goes further to describe this poem as “sassy and talks back to the traditional standards that measure a woman’s beauty” (52). The poem starts with Clifton standing in front of a mirror. The mirror is personified as a person praising Clifton’s body, “telling her how great she is”(Christensen,53). Clifton writes:

listen, you a wonder.

you a city of a woman.

you got a geography of your own.

listen, somebody need a map to understand you.

somebody need directions to move around you. (THW.,1-5)

The above lines is a call made by Clifton for Black women to celebrate their large black bodies, showing them as an “act of empowerment that increases their visibility”(Melancon,etal.,33). Clifton writes: “listen, woman, you not a no place anonymous girl.” Clifton claims that “what the mirror said” permits women to comprehend that they are all seen, they are all have their own identity, and hence they are all have the power to free themselves from the patriarchal and societal norms of ideal beauty(Maulana,2021).

In “I born with twelve fingers”, from the same collection, *Two-Headed Women*, Clifton celebrates having extra numbers of fingers. Clifton was born with twelve fingers, a condition called “polydactyly” (Brown-Guillory, 129). She underwent surgery as an infant to have a finger amputated from each hand. In this poem, Clifton talks about her extra fingers proudly, she considers the extra fingers she gets a sign of mystical power that women of her family have. (Brown-Guillory, 129).

In other words, Clifton defies “the long-ago belief that persons born with extra fingers were witches” (Holladay,37). Clifton claims that she and her oldest daughter and mother were "born wearing strange black gloves" (GW., 166). She says: “I extra baby fingers hanging over the sides of our cribs and I dipped into the milk" (GW.,166). Though their extra fingers were cut off, Clifton claims that she, her mother and daughter do not “lost the magical powers that those fingers bestowed on them”(Holladay,37).She writes:

we take what we want

with invisible fingers

and we connect

my dead mother

my live daughter

through our terrible shadowy hands. (THW.,11-16)

Clifton, in the above lines, is proud of the magical power which is incarnated in the “invisible fingers” (Holladay,37) she has. She seems to be eager to show this legacy which links her to her daughter and mother. Clifton shows that women with twelve fingers should not be held back. She claims that “the surgical removal of the extra fingers is proof,” that "some- body was afraid we would learn to cast spells" (Holladay,37). She suggests that these extra fingers are sources of empowerment for her and for the other women in her family. Clifton asserts that the act of cutting these extra fingers does not lessen the power of her or the power of the other women in her family. Clifton makes these extra

fingers, even after being cut, as an aiding tool that enables her to resist those “who feared black, female power,” (Holladay,37). It enables her to confront those who perceive these extra fingers “as a deviation from the norm” (Holladay,37). Clifton presents her extra fingers as an assertion of her identity, her connection with the other women in her family. They, extra fingers, are also presented as a source of a magical power for her, even after their removal.

Another strategy on which Clifton relies to advocate the concept of women empowerment in her poems is the references she makes to historical Black women models. I.e., Clifton, like the majority women writers of her age, sees in the connection of Afro-American women with their actual mothers, mythical and cultural ones a kind of empowerment. Commenting on this fact point, Hilary Holladay writes:

. . . the [B]lack female visionary poet who acknowledges her mother's continuing presence in her life is insisting on a unique female strength and wisdom passed down from generation to generation. Given the means of transmission, such strength and wisdom defy pervasive attempts to stifle black women and suggest a resilience beyond the ordinary ken. Such is the case with Clifton, who has long paid tribute to both the enduring power and the complexity of black women. (2004)

In her untitled poem, which can be named by its opening line “harriet”, from her collection, *An Ordinary Woman*, Clifton's evokes “the lives of strong [B]lack women in history, considering the chance that she might inherit the strength of those women” (Padgett,240). Clifton makes references to two well-known African-American females, namely: Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Clifton positions herself as an inheritor of the strength of those women. To illustrate, the first historical woman Clifton refers is Harriet Tubman. Tubman was “the first woman to lead an armed assault during the Civil War” (Lawson& Lawson,204). In 1944, “the U.S. Maritime Commission honored her by launching the SS Harriet Tubman, the first Liberty ship named for an African American woman harriet” (Lawson& Lawson,204). In this poem, Clifton seeks a connection with the figure of Harriet. Clifton reveals that she wants to get from the courage and strength of this figure. She writes:

let me not forget

to be the pistol

pointed

to be the madwoman

at the rivers edge

warning

be free or die (OW.,1-9).

The second women to whom Clifton refers to in this poem is Sojourner Truth. Truth was “born into slavery as Isabella Baumfree in Swartekill, New York, around 1797.” Truth was sold as a slave three times before gaining liberty in 1826. After earning her freedom, Truth began her career as “an abolition and women's rights activist.” People were often won over by “her courage and powerful speaking style” (Van Meter,77). Clifton wants to position herself as an incarnation of this woman. She wants to inherit her courage and strength. Clifton writes:

if i be you
 let me in my
 sojourning
 not forget
 to ask my brothers
 aiin't i a woman too. (O.W.,11-16)

In addition to referring to Harriet and Truth, Clifton closes her poem with a reference to her grandmother:

grandmother
 if i be you
 let me not forget to
 work hard
 trust the Gods
 love my children and
 wait. (O.W.,19-25)

The poem implies that Clifton's grandmother worked hard, and “honored Gods”(Hill,2019), a firm faith that occupies Africans system of beliefs. She infers that her grandmother was patient and knew better times would come. Thus, Clifton implies that she has to be strong and patient like her grandmother, and she should long for better times.

In the second section of *An Ordinary Woman*, Clifton writes poems about Kali. Kali is a well-known “Hindu goddess who is considered to free her worshippers from fear (anxiety) and all troubles”(Nivedita,2021). In “The Coming of Kail”, Clifton writes:

it is the black God, Kali,
 a woman God and terrible
 with her skulls and breasts.
 I am one side of your skin,
 she sings, softness is the other,

you know you know me well, she sings,
 you know you know me well.
 Running Kali off is hard.
 she is persistent with her
 black terrible self. She
 knows places in my bones
 I never sing about but
 she knows I know them well.
 She knows.
 She knows. (OW.,1-15)

The lines above examines the dangerous and powerful energy of Kail. Clifton sees the power of Kail as pervasive, but not exactly evil one. Clifton attempts to come into connection with Kail's power, and considers it as "a feminized dimension of herself" (Holladay,2012). It is viewed as an integral part of her female identity.

In "Calming Kail", again introduces a strong women for the sake of empowering women of her race. Clifton writes:

be quiet awful woman,
 lonely as hell,
 and i will comfort you
 when i can
 and give you my bones
 and my blood to feed on.
 gently gently now
 awful woman,
 i know i am your sister. (OW.,1-9)

Thus, Clifton's "Kali" is "a female essence craving the nurturing that black woman have historically given to others" (Holladay,2012). Via the character of Kali, the "all-powerful Great goddess of Hindu mythology, (Holladay,2012) Clifton realizes her own intrinsic demand for nurturing. Clifton claims that the unlimited power of Kail is growing out of her unfulfilled demands, unmet desires. For Clifton, Kali comes to be a dimension of the women self-demanding the love and recognition that she wants to connect with to empower herself.

In "leanna's poem" from *Good woman: Poems and a memoir 1969-1980*, Clifton manages to link herself with the power of her friend figure, Leanna

Webster (Muthuraman,12). The line of the poems demonstrates the strength and power of this female figure. Clifton writes:

one

is never enough for me you said

surrounded by the lunch

we could not taste for eating,

and i smiled and thought about meals

and mealmates and hunger and days and time and life and hunger,

and you are right

it is not, it is never enough; and so this poem is for us, leanna,

two hungry ladies, and i wish for you

what i wish for myself—more than one

more than one

more than one.

(GW.,1-17)

The poem recites Leanna's comment over lunch, saying that: "one /is never enough for me"(GW.,1-2). Leanna's remark on meal and hunger, leads the reader to acknowledge her as a strong and powerful women. Whilst, the repetition of the line "more than one" throughout the course of the poem signifies the desire of the all Black lady who power and strength are unrestricted who wants to achieve more than one desire.

In her poem, "Amazons", from *The Terrible Stories*, Clifton recalls the history of the women warriors of Dahomeyan. Dahomeyan in this poem maintains a reference to the legend of African female warriors who are Clifton's "blood ancestors through her father" (Beaulieu,199). Giving Afro-Americans women a kind of empowerment is the focal point of the poem. Clifton wrote this poem during a period when she was waiting for "her breast cancer diagnosis and lumpectomy" (Beaulieu,199) Clifton connects her capacity to survive through her health crisis to her ability to connect with the strength of Dahomey women. Clifton starts her poem with a description of those Dahomey female warriors, "each cupping one hand around her remaining breast, each with one remaining breast, dancing fiercely in a circle of shared loss and survival:

when the rookery of women

warriors all

each cupping one hand around

her remaining breast

daughters of dahomey

their name fierce on the planet

when they came to ask

who knows what you might have

to sacrifice poet amazon

there is no choice
 then when they each
 with one nipple lifted
 beckoned to me
 five generations removed (TS.,1-14).

The coming lines continues revealing Clifton's claim that her connection with Dahomey women is the source of her strength, power and ability to survive her trail, having breasts cancer:

i rose
 and ran to the telephone
 to hear
 cancer early detection no
 mastectomy not yet
 there was nothing to say
 my sisters swooped in a circle dance
 audre was with them and i
 had already written this poem (TS.,16-23).

Superwoman Role in the society or the "super woman scheme" is another strategy which is explored in Clifton's poems as an inspiration source to empower Afro-American women. Superwoman role emphasises the ability of Afro-American females to hold personal and social responsibilities. Woods-Giscombe' proposes that "superwoman schema" (Florence & Paludi.,62) mirrors women's ability of helping others. It also maintains manifesting strength and resistance to weakness or dependence. It means woman's capacity to restrict her own emotion, and her ability to success despite the limited resources. Thus, superwoman scheme becomes related to women capacity to manage moments of depression by dealing with them rather than "conceptualizing their experience as depression and seeking treatment" (Florence & Paludi.,62).

Clifton draws on this strategy to empower women of her own race. Her method to do so is based on two interrelated perspectives. The first is the presentation of Black Afro-American females as strong mamas. Whilst, the second is the manifestation of their ability to deal with depressions, pain caused by their womanhood with a sense of pleasure, presenting them as an instances of joy.

As for the first fold, Clifton seeks to empower women of her own race via revolving against the portrayal of Black mothers as the Other, an idea that has provided an ideological justification for genderism, racism, and class oppression. It stands against the racist oppression of Black mamas, an

oppression which punishes the Black mothers and presents them with a variety of negative images.

Most prominent in this direction are the poems which Clifton directs to her mother, Thelma Moore Sayles. Clifton's mother, Thelma, was only forty-four when she died. She, Thelma, suffered from many debilitating illnesses which affect her physically as well as mentally. In many of her short poems, Clifton presents her mother as an elusive character, a strong figure who moves through life in the light of her own scheme. She is an ineffably sad figure, yet her spirit is to a large extent strong and magical (Wall,570).

Clifton's poem "Daughters" from her book, *The Book of Light*, is an excellent example of her faith in the superwoman role of Afro-American mothers, and their being an empowerment source for their daughters. In this poem, Clifton presents her real mother, Thelma, and she contemplates on the super power that she casts on her. Addressing her mother Clifton writes:

brilliant woman, i like to think

you whispred into her ear

instructions. i like to think

you are the oddness in us,

you are the arrow

that pierced our plain skin

and made us fancy women; (BL.,3-9)

Then, Clifton calls her mother as a "magic mama" who gives her "extra ordinary power" Clifton writes:

my wild witch gran, my magic mama,

and even these gaudy girls.

i like to think you gave us

extraordinary power and to

protect us, you became the name

we were cautioned to forget.

it is enough,

you must have murmered,

to remember that i was

and that you are. woman, i am

lucille, which stands for light,

daughter of thelma, daughter

of georgia, daughter of

dazzling you.

(BL.,10-23)

Once again, the mothers' strength and wisdom is focused on in Clifton's "what did she know when did she know it" from *The Terrible Stories.*, In this poem, Clifton "wonders how her mother's wisdom was acquired and from what strong and powerful source it grew" (Beaulieu,199). The poem serves as a declaration of how Clifton's connection with her mother endows her strength to overcome all the traumatic crises. Clifton starts her poem with:

in the evenings

what it was the soft tap tap

into the room the cold curve

of the sheet arced off

the fingers sliding in

and the hard clench against the wall

before and after

(TS.,1-7)

Clifton mentions the "cold air" and "cold edges". Then, she declares that in the incident she recalls in this poem her mother was wise and strong enough to realize her father's soft steps into the room and why the little her daughter did not smiled, an incident which clarifies Lucille's faith in her mother's strength and how she thinks that her mother "supposed to know everything." Clifton writes:

all the cold air cold edges

why the little girl never smiled

they are supposed to know everything

our mothers what did she know

when did she know it

(TS.,1-12)

"Aunt Jemima" from *Voices*, is one more poem, which is used by Clifton to perpetuate the image of strong Black mother. The poem is an examination of the presence of racism on the food shelves in "any grocery store in the United States" (Rankine & Sewell,81). Clifton starts her poem with:

white folks say i remind them

of home i who have been homeless

all my life except for their

kitchen cabinets.

i who have made the best

of everything

pancakes batter for chicken

my life
 the shelf on which i sit
 between the flour and cornmeal
 is thick with dreams
 oh how i long for
 my own syrup
 rich as blood
 my true nephews my nieces
 my kitchen my family
 my home (V.,1-17)

Clifton makes a reference to Aunt Jemima, a well-known brand of food in the united State. Clifton hints at the fact that the face which is used to sell the product comes to incarnate the racist tropes in American home life of the African-American woman housekeeper. The face used on the products altered over time, yet was at the beginning a former slave, Nancy Green (Thomas,22). The image which is applied from then on with various designs eternalize “the idea of the Black motherly housekeeper figure looking after a white family who was forced to see little of her own children.” Green perhaps incarnates something of the history of Afro-American females housekeepers. She presents the strength of the “Black woman who was moving around the country and, in a way, the world” (Thomas,23).

Clifton's untitled poem starting with, "my mama moved among the days", from *Good Times*, is the most prominent representative poem in this direction. The poem starts with an image of a mother who is moving “like a dream-walker” (GT., 2). Therefore, the mama in this poem moves through the fields in a manner that has no true destination:

My Mama moved among the days
 like a dreamwalker in a field;
 seemed like what she touched was hers
 seemed like what touched her couldn't hold, (GT.,1-4)

The lines above, describes the mama as having a capacity that enables her to be impervious to the world around her and also as having “a great influence over everything she encounters”(Barker,95). The powerful image of mama which Clifton creates is significant. It presents her ability to navigate the "high grass," (GT.,5) even though she is navigating through the field like a "dreamwalker" (GT.,2). The high grass and field navigation are used to describe mama's movement through days, thus time. The navigation of daily activities is stressful, and although mama moves in the manner of abjection, she is able to help those

with her. By the aid of this mama, the poem's persona is able to navigate the difficulties and stresses of life.

In other words, the character of mama in this poem is highly significant. It stands for an empowerment source for Afro-American females. I.e., via the image of mama in this poem, the poem's persona strengthen African American women. The mama in this poem serves as the facilitator to aid others in their attempt to "navigate the massive historical stressors"(Baker,94). Mama in this poem is presented as a strong leader, and the speaker is implying that the women of Afro-American culture, exemplified by the mama in this poem, are the ones who can recover and lead the culture past the influence of the historically traumatic stressors (Baker,62).

In the final part of the poem, the speaker implies that the mama has changed her direction just before the he could find the edge of the field. The assist that the mama presents to the poem's persona is only enabled him to get himself away from danger. The mama turns back. In the final three lines of the poem, Clifton focuses on the mama's returning back to the massive stressors represented by the tall grass, making it as an act of strength on the mama's part as it indicates her selfless and scarified nature rather than submission:

she got us almost through the high grass
 then seemed like she turned around and ran
 right back in
 right back on in (GT.,5-8)

The figure of mama in this poem is representative of Afro-American "cultural mama"(Barker,96). It uncovers of the importance of "mama" figure in "African American women empowerment"(Barker,96). She is not only guiding "people through the traumatic stressors, but she chooses to return to help others, much like Harriet Tubman"(Barker,96). The act of returning back does not undermines the resilience of African American women, rather it shows the selfless power in her choices. Mama in this poem is, as J.D. Baker perceives, "a martyr attempting to save others so that they do not face the same painful isolation that she faces" (96). She is an empowering figure who empowers women, especially those of African origin. Her strength and endurance do not empower Afro-American females, but, as the poem proposes, it is the Afro-American culture that will be empowered to "endure the difficulties that surround them" (Barker,96).

In "Wishes for my sons", from *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010*, Clifton introduces one more perspective of mama's strength and power. I.e., in this poem, Clifton presents mothers' ability to find pleasure and joy in the pains of motherhood. She finds joy in all the things that people may see negative or painful. To clarify, Clifton, in this short poem, dwells upon the cycle of fertility and the pain it may cause to women's body through. Clifton starts her

poem with her wishes that her sons would experience the biological processes and undertake activities, such as: the use of tampons, cramps, wearing of skirts, hot flashes and visiting gynaecologists, (O'reilly,988) that are inherent in women. She writes:

i wish them cramps.
 i wish them a strange town
 and the last tampon.
 i wish them no 7-11.
 i wish them one week early
 and wearing a white skirt.
 i wish them one week late.
 later i wish them hot flashes
 and clots like you
 wouldn't believe. let the
 flashes come when they
 meet someone special.
 let the clots come
 when they want to.
 let them think they have accepted
 arrogance in the universe,
 then bring them to gynecologists
 not unlike themselves. (CP.,1-18)

Actually, Clifton in this poem deals with the pains of motherhood with joy and pleasure. Her wishes maintains a sense humour, as she defies sons who will grow into men to experience these trails of motherhood. Clifton wishes for sons can be surmised under one wish only, which is sons "should have the courage of women" (O'Reilly,202).

In her poem, "admonitions", the last poem in her collection, *Good Times*, Clifton, again, seeks to empower women of her race via the use of the image of strong mamas who have super power in dealing with pain of womanhood with joy and pleasure. The poem opens with a mother, who is addressing both her daughters and sons, saying:

children
 when they ask you
 why is your mama so funny

say

she is a poet (GT.,18-22)

Clifton is teaching her children how to answer anyone who may ask them about their mother. Clifton instructs her children to answer that “she is a poet/she don't have no sense”(GT.,21-22). Such ironic conversational introduces the mother’s “sturdy imperviousness” (Fogarty,167) and shows her strength in managing pains of womanhood. When the mother instructs her sons and daughters how to response to those who ask them about their mother, Clifton’s focus is on power that the mother has, a power which casts its spell on the children, and endows them with power and strength to deal with dangerous and difficult situations.

Commenting on this poem, W. Fogarty claims that the mother in this poem “directs her children to utilize language for self-protection—indeed not just to use language but to invoke the language of poetry: they are to inscrutable powers.”(167). He goes further to suggest that the poem itself is “a nuanced linguistic strategy”(167). It presents the colloquial language of the mother in addressing her children in a domestic setting, a speech which implicitly addresses “entire community”(Fogarty,167). Thus, the poem is viewed as a “memo to an African American mother's "boys," "girls," and "children" skirts the line between personal communiqué and public pronouncement” (Fogarty,167). Clifton writes:

boys

i don't promise you nothing but this

what you pawn

i will redeem

what you steal

i will conceal

my private silence to

your public guilt

is all i got (GT.,1-9)

She urges her children to “say” the word “poet” when their mother's credibility and competence are suspected.

In her “poem to my uterus”, from *Quilting Poems* Clifton presents an image of super strong mama who is able hold her personal responsibility and deal with painful moments of womanhood with resilience. The poem is written during Clifton’s struggle against cancer. Thus, the poem presents Clifton’s ability to deal with health crisis along with the experiences that come with being a mother and a woman. The poem is written as an intimate dialogue with Clifton’s uterus.

It represents the speaker's coming to terms with the pending loss of her uterus and all that it has represented to her as a woman and mother:

you uterus
 you have been patient
 as a sock
 while i have slipped into you
 my dead and living children
 now
 they want to cut you out
 stocking i will not need
 where i am going
 where am i going
 old girl
 without you (QP.,1-12)

The poem serves as a desperate farewell letter to a dear and old companion. Clifton introduces an image of the uterus as a "sock" or "slipper", an image of tenderness and familiarity. It is soft, protective, and becomes simultaneously nurturing. Clifton says that both her "dead and living children" have passed through it, suggesting perhaps miscarriages, abortions, or still births (Cucinella,66). Then, Clifton portrays her uterus as a "sock", a realization that she is passing into an age when fertility will no longer be possible.

In the coming lines, Clifton's poetic images become more magical, and desperate, as she writes:

uterus
 my bloody print
 my estrogen kitchen
 my black bag of desire.
 where can i go
 barefoot
 without you
 where can you go
 without me (QP.,14-22)

Clifton portrays her uterus as a vehicle through which women are able to conceive and to give birth. There is a steep price to pay in order to be fertile. Thus, after lamenting the loss of her uterus, Clifton restore her resilience and

strength. She perceives that losing this part of her body is the cost of fertility and motherhood. She claims that as illness or menopause enjoin the end of fertility, physical and emotional alterations must be made on the part of women. Clifton skillfully gains this balance of blessing and curse. It is a strategy that she implies to empower women in general and females of Black race in particular to deal with their pain with great patience and strength.

Conclusion:

Black Women Empowerment is a dominating thematic concept in modern and contemporary Afro-American poetry. It appears as a reaction to the inequality, racism and gender oppression from which African women suffers from at the hand of White American males and females. The roots of this poetic concept returns back to the Afro-American-led movement of art which is called Black Art Movement (1960s-1970s). Lucille Clifton, an Afro-American female poet and writer, carries the main ingredient thematic concern of this artistic movement. This is why, Black women empowerment grows to be the main thematic focus of her poems. The aim of her empowering poems is to stir the growth of the women of her own race, and enable them to resist the oppression of the American society. The celebration of the black beauty of the Afro-American women as an assertion of their identity, the re-creation of the historical and mythical models of strong Black women as well as exploration of superwoman role of Afro-American women are the most pervasive strategies which Clifton relies on to advocate the empowerment of Black women in her poems.

مفهوم تمكين المرأة في الشعر الأفريقي الأمريكي: دراسة في قصائد لوسيل كليفتون
المختارة

الكلمات المفتاحية: المرأة السوداء ، التمكين ، الهوية

م.م. أسماء فؤاد أحمد

الجامعة التقنية الوسطى/معهد ادارة الرصافة

الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى التحقيق في مفهوم مهم في شعر الشاعرات الأمريكيات الأفرو-أمريكيات المعاصرات ، ألا وهو تمكين المرأة السوداء. يقدم البحث استكشافية موجزة لهذا المفهوم وتعريفه وبيان أسباب ظهوره. بعد ذلك ، يذهب البحث إلى دراسة هذا المفهوم في قصائد لوسيل كليفتون المختارة. تلقي الورقة الضوء على الاستراتيجيات الشعرية المتعددة التي تعتمد عليها كليفتون لإثارة مفهوم تمكين المرأة السوداء في قصائدها. أبرز هذه الإستراتيجيات التمكينية هي: إظهار السمات الجسدية للمرأة الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي كتأكيد على هويتهم ، وفضح قوة وتحمل النساء السود من خلال إحياء نماذج من النساء السود القويات في الأساطير والتاريخ ، وكذلك إظهار دور المرأة الخارقة للأمهات السود وقدرتهن على الاستمرار في العيش حتى في خضم المسارات.

Work Cited:

- Anand , KULKARNI. (2020). INDIA AND THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY: Performance, Perils, and Prospects. SPRINGER VERLAG, SINGAPOR.
- Barker, J. D. (2020). Trauma in 20th Century Multicultural American Poetry: Unmuted Verse. Lexington Books.
- Beaulieu, E. A. (Ed.). (2006). Writing African American Women. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Bennett, M., & Dickerson, V. D. (Eds.). (2001). Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women. Rutgers University Press.
- Bonta, E. (Ed.). (2014). Perspectives on Interaction. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

- Brown-Guillory, E. (Ed.). (1996). *Women of color: mother-daughter relationships in 20th-century literature*. University of Texas Press.
- Chattopadhyay, A. (2005). "Women and entrepreneurship". *Yojana, a Monthly Journal of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting*, 5(1), 123-156.
- Christensen, L. (2009). *Teaching for joy and justice: Re-imagining the language arts classroom*. Rethinking Schools.
- Clifton, L. (1969). "Good times". *The Massachusetts Review*, 10(1), 86-86.
- _____. (2014). *Good woman: Poems and a memoir 1969-1980*. BOA Editions, Ltd.
- _____. (2015). *The collected poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010*. BOA Editions, Ltd..
- _____.(1974). *An Ordinary Woman*. Random House.
- _____.(1991). *Quilting: Poems, 1987-1990*. BOA Editions.
- _____.(1996). *The Terrible Stories*. BOA Editions.
- _____.(1996). *The Terrible Stories: Poems*. BOA Editions.
- _____.(2008). *Voices*. BOA Editions.
- _____. (1998). *Two-Headed Women*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Cucinella, C. (Ed.). (2002). *Contemporary American women poets: an A-to-Z guide*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- De Roche, L. (Ed.). (2021). *Twentieth-Century and Contemporary American Literature in Context [4 volumes]*. ABC-CLIO.
- Denmark, Florence & Michele A. Paludi.(Eds.).(2018).*Women and Leadership*. United State.Springer.
- Finkelman, P. (2009). *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: JN (Vol. 3)*. Oxford University Press.
- Fogarty, W. (2022). *The Politics of Speech in Later Twentieth-Century Poetry: Local Tongues in Heaney, Brooks, Harrison, and Clifton*. Springer Nature.
- Harjani, Emilia Tetty. "The Feminist Voice in Lucille Clifton's The Thirty Eighth War, Miss Rosie, and Final Note to Clark." *Litera*. Vol. 12, No. 01. Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, 2013, pp. 27-38. JSTOR.
- Hill, D. (2019). *A Bound Woman is a Dangerous Thing: The Incarceration of African American Women from Harriet Tubman to Sandra Bland*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Hiremath, S. S. (2021). *WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THE 21st CENTURY: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE*. Blue Diamond Publishing.

- Holladay, Hilary.(2004). Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton. United States of America.Louisiana State University Press.
- Lawson, R. M., & Lawson, B. A. (Eds.). (2019). Race and Ethnicity in America: From Pre-contact to the Present [4 volumes]. ABC-CLIO.
- Lyimo, G. E. (2016). Empowerment and Autonomy of Women: Ushirika Wa Neema Deaconess Centre in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, Northern Diocese. Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Maulana, I. (2021). BLACK FEMINISM IDEAS AS PORTRAYED IN HOMAGE TO MY HIPS POEM BY LUCILLE CLIFTON. United State. Gale, Cengage Learning .
- Melancon, T., Braxton, J. M., Harris-Perry, M., Brown, K. J., & Patterson, C. J. (2015). Black female sexualities. Rutgers University Press.
- Muthuraman, K.(2015). “Womanism in Lucille Clifton's An Ordinary Woman”. Notions. Vol.6 No3:11-16.
- Nivedita, S. (2021). Kali the mother. Prabhat Prakashan.
- O'reilly, A. (Ed.). (2010). Encyclopedia of motherhood (Vol. 1). Sage.
- O'Reilly, A. (Ed.). (2012). From motherhood to mothering: The legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of woman born. SUNY Press.
- Overbeck, A. (2019). At the Heart of It All?: Discourses on the Reproductive Rights of African American Women in the 20th Century (Vol. 4). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- Padgett, Ron.(Ed.).(2000).World Poet. Oxford .Scribner
- Pragati., Dr.(Ed.).(2022). Towards Equality: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Womens Empowerment. Krishna Publication House.
- Purkayastha, D. (2012). “Foregrounding ‘her’ stories: Black women’s literary movement”. Dibrugarh University Journal of English Studies, 20, 1-14.
- Rankine, C., & Sewell, L. (Eds.). (2012). Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Poets Across North America. Wesleyan University Press.
- Sahay, S. (1998). Women and empowerment: Approaches and strategies. Discovery Publishing House.
- Sarkar, S. (2011). International Journal of Afro-Asian Studies. Universal-Publishers. 2 (2):1-51.
- Sushama, S. (1998). Women and Empowerment- Approach and Strategies. Discovery Publishing House, Delhi

-
- Thomas, S. L. (2001). "Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima". *Transforming Anthropology*, 10(1): 1-58.
 - Tunç, T. E. (2009). "The poetics of self-writing: women and national body in the works of Lucille Clifton". *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*. 26(1):187-200.
 - Van Meter, L. A. (2008). *Women Win the Vote: The Hard-fought Battle for Women's Suffrage*. Enslow Publishing, LLC.
 - Wall, C. A. (1999). "Sifting Legacies in Lucille Clifton's Generations". *Contemporary Literature*, 40(4), 552-574. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208794> .
 - Whitemore, E. (1988). Participation, Empowerment and Welfare. *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 22(6), 51-60.
 - Zid, M. B. (2019). "Unearthing New Dimensions of Black "Womanism": Poetic Resistance and the Journey from Absence to Self-Representation". *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*. 10(6), 12-19.