



Resilience in Selected Poems by Aja Monet: A Black Feminist Study

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Abstract:

This study delves into the resilience of Black women through an analysis of Aja Monet's poetry, focusing on her poems "Refuge" and "Grow" from the collection *The Black Unicorn Sings* (2010). Grounded in Black Feminist Theory, the research explores how Monet portrays Black women's experiences, struggles, and triumphs, highlighting their resilience in the face of intersecting systems of oppression. Through vivid imagery and metaphor, Monet's poetry illuminates the internal battles and external pressures Black women face, emphasizing their unwavering spirit and forms of resistance. Drawing on resilience concepts within Black Feminist Thought, the study showcases how Black women navigate and challenge oppressive structures, reclaiming agency for their identities and narratives. By focusing on the voices of Black women authors like Monet, the research enriches the literary canon with diverse voices and catalyzes critical discourse on literature, feminism, social justice, and cultural diversity while advocating for equitable representation across all facets of literary expression. This is accomplished through an analysis of two poems by Aja Monet through the lens of Black Feminist Theory, with a focus on resilience.

Keywords: Aja Monet, Black Feminist Theory, Grow, Refuge, Resilience.

بەرخودان لە چەند ھۆنراوەیەکی ھەڵبژێردراوی ئازا مۆنی: توێژینەوێیەکی فیمینستی رەش فیان محمود زامدار^۱ - سامان صلاح حسن^۲

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پوختە:

ئەم توێژینەوێیە توتووی بەرخودانی ژنانی رەشپێست لە ڕێگەی شیکردنەوێی ھۆنراوەکانی (ئازا مۆنی) ھوێ دەکات، بەدیاریکراوی لە ھەردو ھۆنراوەی (ئاوارەبون) و (گەشە)دا، کە لە کۆمەڵە ھۆنراوەی "The Black Unicorn Sings" دا، لە ساڵی ۲۰۱۰ بڵاوکراوەتەوێ. ھەر بە پێودانەکانی تیۆری فیمینستی رەش، توێژینەوێیەکی ھەول دەدات ئەو پێشاندات کە چۆن مۆنی ئەزموون، تیکۆشان و سەرکەوتنەکانی ژنانی رەشپێست دەخاتەرو، ھەروەھا چۆن سەرنج لە بەرخودانیان دەدات لەبەردەم سیستەمە یەکتەرەکانی چەوساندنەوێ.

لەمیانەوی وێناکردن و خوازی رۆندا، ھۆنراوەکانی مۆنی جەنگە ناوخییەکان و ئەو فشارە دەرەکییانە ئاشکرا دەکات کە دووچاری ژنانی رەشپێست دەبنەوێ، جەخت لەسەر گیانی نەلەزێو و جۆرەکانی بەرگری دەکاتەوێ. بە پشتبەستن بە چەمکەکانی بەرخودان لە ھزری فیمینیزی رەش، توێژینەوێیەکی ئەو پێشان دەدات کە ژنانی رەشپێست چۆن بونیادە چەوسێنەرەوێکان دەناسنەوێ و رۆبەرۆیان دەبنەوێ، ھەروەھا لە پێناوی گەڕاندنەوێی شوناس بۆ خۆیان ئەمەش لە ڕێگەی دەنگی ژنانی رەشپێستی وەک (مۆنی)ی نوسەرەوێ. توێژینەوێیەکی ھەول دەدات شتێکی زیاتر پێشکەش ئەدەب بکات و لە ڕێگەیەوێ ئەدەب، بزوتنەوێی فیمینیزم و دادی کۆمەڵایەتی بەرھەوێش ببات.

کلیلە وشە: ئازا مۆنی، ئاوارەبون، گەشە، تیۆری فیمینستی رەش، بەرخودان.

Introduction

The experiences and narratives of Black women have long been marginalized within traditional feminist discourse, often overshadowed by dominant narratives that fail to capture the complexities of their lived realities. This study examines Aja Monet's poetry, specifically her poems "Refuge" and "Grow," which are published in the poet's collection *The Black Unicorn Sings* (Monet, 2010) within the framework of Black Feminist Theory. The primary aim is to explore Black women's resilience through their experiences, struggles, and triumphs while highlighting the significance of Black Feminist Theory as a lens for literary analysis and social critique.

The study provides a platform to amplify the voices of Black women authors like Aja Monet, whose work often reflects the resilience and agency of Black women in the face of intersecting systems of oppression. By emphasizing such voices, dominant narratives that marginalize or erase their contributions can be challenged, contributing to a more inclusive

and equitable representation in the literary canon. This research also contributes to the broader discourse on literature, feminism, and social justice by showcasing the richness and diversity of Black women's experiences. Through analyzing Monet's poetry, Black women's lives are illuminated. The work, meanwhile, indicates the importance of Black Feminist Theory as a framework for understanding and addressing the position of Black women in the society and the way they are portrayed in black literature.

Monet's poems "Refuge" and "Grow" demonstrate the resilience of Black women in the face of marginalization and racial oppression. Through the images and metaphors used in the poems, Monet clearly shows what Black women strive for, which usually centers around the recognition of their place in society and the establishment of equal rights with whites. The poems embody the unstoppable struggles of Black women for racial and gender equality, as far as there are attempts to ghettoize and sideline them.

Resilience in the Context of Black Feminist Thought

According to the American Psychological Association, resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to complex or challenging life experiences, primarily through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands (APA, 2014). Resilience is the ability to successfully cope with and adapt to acute stress, trauma, and chronic life challenges (Bonanno et al., 2006, Larson et al., 2008). Another definition states that resilience is "The ability to bounce back from or to resist the effects of apparently traumatic events" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014, p. 14). Moreover, "Resilience is cultivated over the course of individuals', families', communities', and nations' lives in particular socio-historical-economic and political conditions" (Buzzanell, 2021, p. 45).

Resilience, within the framework of black feminist thought, acknowledges the unique challenges faced by Black women due to the intersections of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression, and it underscores their ability not only to endure but also actively challenge and transform oppressive structures. Generally, it is defined as: "A concept used to refer to the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress" (Goodkind et al., 2020, p. 318). Certain scholars notice that resilience has various dimensions, and dimensions of the power system should be considered: "Resilience is often seen or defined as overcoming hardships or something easily obtainable; however, that does not paint the whole picture. This

particular definition of resilience does not consider systems of power, privilege, and oppression that impact marginalized people's lives every day" (Chance, 2022, p. 22).

Expanding upon the conceptualization of resilience as a dynamic construct existing along a continuum rather than a static entity, yields significant ramifications for its evaluative methodologies within scholarly discourse. This perspective underscores the imperative for employing comprehensive assessment frameworks capable of delineating resilience across diverse dimensions and contexts inherent to human experience. Such multidimensional measures are essential for capturing the manifestations of resilience across varied facets of individual and collective life trajectories, thereby enabling a more understanding of its complexities and adaptive potentials: "Determinants of resilience include a host of biological, psychological, social and cultural factors that interact with one another to determine how one responds to stressful experiences" (Southwick et al., 2014, p. 1). Despite the deep theoretical resonance between feminist scholarship and the concept of resilience, there exists a notable gap in studies that specifically interrogate how feminist communication practices foster and shape resilience: "Surprisingly, there is not much scholarship in feminist communication resilience per se" (Buzzanell, 2021, p. 46).

The lack of scholarly research on feminist communication resilience is a notable gap in academic discourse. Despite extensive literature on feminist theory and resilience, there's little focused inquiry into how feminist communication practices relate to resilience. This gap highlights a need to understand how gender-informed communication strategies contribute to adaptive responses and empowerment in various social contexts. Bridging this gap is crucial for developing theoretical frameworks and interventions to enhance resilience through feminist perspectives, deepening the understanding of gender and communication dynamics in resilience research.

Black Feminist Theory

Resilience discourse takes on a critical dimension when examined within the context of marginalized communities, where systemic inequities, resource deprivation, and persistent stressors shape lived experiences. Far from merely signifying an individual's capacity to withstand adversity, resilience in these populations emerges as a complex process. It encompasses both navigating disadvantages and actively challenging the structures that perpetuate them. Understanding this form of resilience has implications for research and intervention. It highlights the adaptive strengths of marginalized

communities, promotes culturally responsive frameworks, and necessitates a focus on systemic change alongside the cultivation of individual resilience.

Feminist frameworks portray resilience as a complex and profoundly political construct. For women and other marginalized groups, resilience extends beyond enduring patriarchal structures and gender-based oppression. It encompasses the ongoing work of dismantling these systems, resisting restrictive norms, and carving out spaces for self-determination and collective empowerment. Resilience, as understood through a feminist lens, is not merely about survival but transformation – both personal and societal, as Buzzanell claims: “feminist resilience is human-centered” (Buzzanell, 2021, p. 48).

Recounting the experiences of Black women is a concern that challenges traditional feminism. It elucidates how Black women maneuver within structures of authority and subjugation, shedding light on their challenges. Black Feminist Theory aims to empower and elevate marginalized Black women by focusing on their collective experiences. It also seeks to encounter established standards and promote revolutionary social change. Black women authors assert their agency, expertly empower themselves, and disrupt the foundations of existing power structures. By illuminating the often-overlooked experiences, endeavors, and successes of Black women, their literary texts not only resist marginalization but also serve as a base that would help their voices be heard, ensuring that they can no longer be silenced, as Claudia Tate excerpts from Audre Lorde explains: “I write for these women for whom a voice has not yet existed or whose voices have been silenced” (Tate & Olsen, 2023, p. 115).

Black Feminist Theory aims to expose the dehumanization and objectification of Black women, highlighting their lasting impact on their identity and self-discovery. The dehumanizing narrative has detrimental effects as it not only distorts society’s opinion of Black women but also erases their real-life experiences and suppresses their voices. Black Feminist Theory aims to achieve, as Collins states, a “Fundamental paradigmatic shift” (Collins, 2022, p. 291). It revolutionizes and boosts the status of Black women, offering a precise characterization that recognizes their complex identities and varied experiences.

Black feminist thought recognizes the power of imagination as a vital source of resilience and a catalyst for liberation, as it allows for the development of alternative visions that challenge oppressive narratives and sustain a sense of self-determination amidst struggle. In this sense, according to Jenkins, Black feminist scholars have always emphasized the ability to craft new narratives as essential for reclaiming agency and

affirming Black womanhood in the face of oppressive systems. For Black women, the act of envisioning a world beyond the constraints of racism and sexism becomes a tool for both enduring peace and actively working towards a more just future: “A key feature in human activity which fuels creativity and resilience is the imaginative power available to human mentality that can provide perspectives leading to new and liberating behavior or at the very least to an alternative vision that sustains one’s sense of humanity” (Jenkins, 2005, p. 29). Thus, instances of resilience raised in the writings of Black female authors, among them poets, are testimonies to the persistent efforts exerted to bring about a world of equal opportunities and rights.

Exploring Resilience in Monet’s Poetry

1. “Refuge”

Aja Monet's “Refuge” represents Black womanhood, resonating with the core tenets of Black Feminist Theory. The opening metaphors of a “haunted house” and a “ghost town” immediately introduce the poem’s focus on intersectionality, the concept introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw, highlighting the complex nature of the lived experiences of marginalized individuals, emphasizing their multiple dimensions (Crenshaw, 2013). The “haunted house” transcends a physical structure, metaphorically representing the lasting effects of historical trauma, which: “Provides a macro-level, temporal framework for examining how the ‘life course’ of a population exposed to trauma at a particular point in time compares with that of unexposed populations” (Sotero, 2006, p. 94), and societal oppression one can feel within the Black female experience, for: “According to the historical trauma framework, experiences of a soul wound, cumulative loss and unresolved grief are culturally-specific stress responses that could occur from subjugation” (Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022, p. 13). The images evoke the legacies of historical trauma stemming from systemic racism, the intergenerational effects of gendered oppression, and the enduring impacts on individual psyches as aspects of resilience:

Some days,
I am a haunted house
where spirits linger
a guilt-ridden ghost town.
There are niggers here
Knocking
knocking

on my door
for change
a fix
a mind,
a heart
maybe, even a meal (Monet, 2010, p. 10).

The phrase “flesh of my flesh/ blood of my blood” suggests a broader community connected to the speaker’s experiences. This connection alludes to shared struggles within a black female lineage. It hints at potential collective strength and resilience, reflecting Black Feminist Theory’s acknowledgment of community as a source of support and empowerment, as stated by Collins: “Viewing the world through a both/and conceptual lens of the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression and the need for a humanist vision of community creates new possibilities for empowering Afrocentric feminist knowledge” (Collins, 1993, p. 553):

finger licking good
a chance to prove worthy,
human
silk, blossom, bruise flesh
of my flesh
blood
of my blood
I am a screaming body
a cryptic home (Monet, 2010, pp. 10-11).

The “blood of my blood” signifies the heredity of Black women, highlighting collective memory as Alinia states: “Despite internal heterogeneities, there is a group knowledge and a consciousness based on a collective memory and a shared history as well as common daily experiences of being a black woman in the USA” (Alinia, 2015, p. 2335).

The speaker’s resistance to imposed stereotypical descriptions like “mad woman” underscores the central Black Feminist Theory’s precept of self-discovery: “Self-definition helps us clearly define who we are, and thus, we are less likely to be swayed away by negative external self-images and even if not physically can mentally resist the oppressor”

(Anburaj & Mangayarkarasi, 2021, p. 6367). Resilience, in this context, refers to the strength and endurance demonstrated by Black women in the face of systemic oppression and discrimination. It encompasses their ability to navigate and resist these stereotypes while advocating for their rights and dignity. By rejecting external attempts to define her, she asserts agency for her identity and lived experience. This aligns with the Black Feminist Theory in aspects of self-knowledge, and the latter is considered by Ocran as an emphasis on authentic identity in defiance of dominant narratives (Ocran, 2021). However, the line “something has died in me” reveals an interior struggle and vulnerability as Black women are suffering as stated by Zonicle: “Black women ascribe to multiple vulnerable populations, they are at an increased risk of harassment, which leads this population to experience higher rates of psychological distress, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)” (Zonicle, 2022, p.6). Both violet and bruise could refer to physical, as well as emotional, pain and damage. ‘Plum’ intensifies the fragility of the speaker. On the other hand, violet may signify a naturally acquired condition. As if being black necessarily entails a status of suffering, pain, and vulnerability. This correlates with being ‘black’ in color. This highlights the complexity of Black women’s experiences and the validity of pain alongside resilience, which is defined as: “The capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development” (Masten, 2011, p. 494) and “when the way of the world includes a general lack of cultural competence and an aversion to valuing the unique contributions of gender, these [latter] survival characteristics are degraded and punished rather than recognized as tools of resilience” (Goodkind et al., 2020, p. 28):

Today,
I am a mad woman
plum, violet breasted
an absent minded
colored
girl, something
has died
in me (Monet, 2010, p. 11).

The poem's ending line, "madly in love/ with their silence," introduces ambiguity. While suggesting a sense of despair and resignation, this silence could also be a form of resistance as put by Hegde: "In the experiences of the battered ... women, resistance must be read in the silences – in the quiet determination to contest male domination" (Hegde, 1996, p. 313). By refusing to engage with the speaker's pain, the "mirrors" become witnesses to her suffering. Thus, the speaker finds a strange power in disrupting their complacency with her silent defiance. This ambiguity mirrors the multifaceted nature of resilience explored by Black Feminist Theory scholars, showcasing that resistance can take subtle and unexpected forms:

I know they
their silence wears mirrors
and they are driven mad,
madly in love
with their silence (Monet, 2010, p. 12).

The "mirrors" symbolize a society unwilling or unable to confront the realities of Black women's pain, aligning with Black Feminist Theory's critique of dominant narratives, either from the community collectively, black men's society, or from mainstream feminism, which is termed "Singular feminist narrative" (Makama et al., 2019, p. 2), that disregard Black women's perspectives and lived experiences.

Through its complex exploration of internal struggles, external pressures, and the nature of resilience, "Refuge" offers a compelling portrayal of Black women's resilience that resonates with Black Feminist Theory's assumptions. The poem invites readers to move beyond simplified narratives and delve into the lived experiences of Black women, acknowledging the intersectional challenges they face, their unwavering spirit, and the forms of resistance they employ in a world that often seeks to silence them.

2. "Grow"

Aja Monet's "Grow" is about Black women's experiences and reflects the core tenets of Black Feminist Theory. The opening lines, "Mud woman, stop building shrines to your past/ what earth have you left for yourself," present a negotiation between past pain and the potential for transformation, as put by Taylor: "Black women recognize a distinct cultural heritage that gives them the energy and skills to resist and transform daily discrimination" (Taylor, 1998, p. 235). The image also alludes to externally imposed

dehumanizing narratives: “Dehumanization is systemic racism’s psychological dynamic, and racialized roles are its social masks. Recurring exploitation, discrimination, and inequality constitute its structure, and patterns such as residential segregation are its spatial manifestations” (Feagin and Ducey, 2018, p. 20), and “Dehumanization is a psychological process of making some people seem less than human or not worthy of humane treatment; dehumanization serves to morally exclude individuals from the norms of society” (Hairston, 2008, p. 65). The poem introduces themes of overcoming limitations and embracing self-determination, which are also considered pivotal concepts in Black Feminist Theory: “Womanists and Black feminists articulate the ideas of the lived experiences of Black women, culture, self-definition, and self-determination” (Brewer, 2020, p. 91). This initial self-challenge signals a shift away from self-imposed limitations, setting the stage for the speaker’s defiant journey towards self-actualization:

Mud woman, stop building shrines to your past
what earth have you left for yourself to love
like this, returning to your mother's home
of curses and witchery, slick tongue of fire and regrets (Monet, 2010, p. 54).

The poem’s exploration of resilience is deeply intertwined with transformation and a reclamation of agency. The poem challenges patriarchal notions by suggesting that the speaker embodies a divine essence comparable to a miracle while alluding to the leverage contest within the patriarchal system, connoting the intolerance that emerged contingent to the inter-andro conflict. Using the word “God” as a symbol of what could be regarded as a pivotal hinge, which the male-dominated mainstream narratives hinge on, exhibits the profound struggle that challenges women's creativity:

You are a drop of miracle.
If you had a father
God would have been jealous (Monet, 2010, p. 54).

Black Feminist Theory calls for rejecting externally imposed standards and celebrating the full spectrum of Black women’s identities. The speaker’s embrace of her “smell of funk and armpit” is a bold rejection of respectability politics and a reclamation of her body on her own terms. The act of asserting one's physicality through the lines “Elbow

and ankle your way/ through” echoes the embodied resistance discussed by Black Feminist Theory scholars (Alinia, 2015, Matandela, 2017). It suggests a defiance of expectations regarding how Black women should occupy space within oppressive societal structures:

When the air is wet and sticky,
take time to please yourself in your own
smell of funk and armpit.
Elbow and ankle your way
Through (Monet, 2010, p. 54).

The lines “Set another woman free/ She is bathing in the lotus of you” suggest the speaker’s self-discovery and resilience, unlock a desire to dismantle the structures that confined her. Empowering another woman significantly highlights the potential for shared growth and a collaborative challenge to oppressive systems. By extending liberation beyond her individual experience, the speaker embodies the Black Feminist Theory’s emphasis on community as a source of healing, as Melonas argues: “Looking at the content created in the exchange and what it reveals about Black women’s ability to cultivate community among one another and in a way that is both revitalizing and world-altering” (Melonas, 2021, p. 39), and a catalyst for collective resistance, which could be regarded as a milestone in the literature of black female writers, insofar as expressed by Fox: “Resisting white supremacy is a collective responsibility that requires alliances across racial boundaries” (Fox, 2001, p. 79):

Set another woman free.
She is bathing in the lotus of you
blossoming in the breath of you
gasping in the quench of you
bending in the arch of your back (Monet, 2010, pp. 54-55).

The injunction to “escape your body” suggests a tension between the self and the desire for liberation or transcendence. This tension resonates with the black feminist tradition’s exploration of how Black women’s bodies have been historically objectified, commodified, and constrained by oppressive systems. Objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) proposes that Western culture encourages individuals, particularly women, to internalize narrow socio-cultural beauty standards. This leads to a habit of self-

surveillance, where they view their bodies from an outsider's perspective, often resulting in feelings of shame (Aubrey, 2006, Meier and Gray, 2014, McKinley and Hyde, 1996). The poem hints at the yearning for freedom from these constraints by urging escape. Also, the speaker encourages spending time with celestial bodies like the moon and the sun, symbolizing a reclaiming of space and agency. This act of pointing to the sun with "your hand on your hip" evokes a posture of defiance and self-assurance:

Remember to escape your body
every chance you get. Spend time with the moon,
point your finger to the sun
with your hand on your hip
like the attitude of winter (Monet, 2010, pp. 55-56).

The imagery of swallowing stars and harboring wild creatures within one's darkness suggests resilience and inner strength. Despite facing adversity, "Mud woman," the speaker, refuses to be defined by bitterness or victimhood. Instead, she embraces her experiences as sources of wisdom and wit, reclaiming agency for her narrative and identity. The poem celebrates multiple identities and experiences, as reflected in the imagery of protecting "tigers and lions, fairies and dragonflies." This inclusivity testifies to the validity of Black Feminist Theory, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression and the importance of solidarity across diverse communities (Collins, 2019). By rejecting the label of an "aimless black satin bullet," the speaker challenges reductive and stereotypical depictions of Black women as passive or disposable. Instead, she asserts her agency and complexity, refusing to be confined by narrow narratives imposed by society:

Remember to escape your body
every chance you get. Spend time with the moon,
point your finger to the sun
with your hand on your hip
like the attitude of winter.
Always swallow the stars, let the river of them
rest their faces in the dark of you
where you protect tigers and lions,
fairies and dragonflies
Mud woman, you are never bitter

no, you are not an aimless black satin bullet
 simply call it experience,
 call it wit (Monet, 2010, pp. 55-56).

Monet's "Grow" offers a thorough description of self-love, resilience, and solidarity within the framework of Black Feminist Theory. Through evocative imagery and lyrical language, the poem challenges oppressive narratives, celebrates the beauty and strength of black womanhood, and calls for collective liberation and empowerment.

Conclusions

Aja Monet's poems, "Refuge" and "Grow," see the resilience of Black women as a tool of resistance to oppressive societal structures. "Refuge" delves into the speaker's internal struggles and external pressures, highlighting the enduring legacy of historical trauma and societal oppression. Through poetic imagery and language, the poem explores the themes of identity, agency, and collective memory. "Grow" depicts a journey of self-discovery, empowerment, and collective solidarity. The speaker confronts past pain and societal expectations and restores agency to her purposefully neglected position in society. Through images of transformation, defiance, and self-love, the poem celebrates the resilience and strength inherent in Black womanhood.

In both poems, resilience emerges as a multifaceted and political construct rooted in the experiences and struggles of Black women. By challenging misogynist narratives, embracing collective empowerment, the speakers embody the transformative potential of resilience within the context of Black feminist thought. Studying resilience within Black feminist thought offers valuable insights into the identity, struggle, and empowerment complexities. Aja Monet's poems illuminate the strength of Black women, inviting readers to engage with the rich tapestry of their experiences and the transformative power of collective solidarity.

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