

# POETICS OF SURVIVAL: INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, MEMORY, AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN CLAUDIA RANKINE'S CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC

***Awais Qarni***

*MS in English Literature, Department of English, College of Foreign Languages and Literature, Northwest Normal University, China*

Email: [awaisqarni8494@gmail.com](mailto:awaisqarni8494@gmail.com)

***Hafsah Tariq***

*Mphil in English Literature, National University of Modern Languages, H-9, Islamabad.*

Email: [Hafsahtariqliterature14@gmail.com](mailto:Hafsahtariqliterature14@gmail.com)

***Muhammad Kashif***

*BS English Language and Literature, Government Degree College No 1.D.I.Khan*

Email: [kasareebajani32@gmail.com](mailto:kasareebajani32@gmail.com)

## ***Abstract***

*The paper will discuss Citizen: An American Lyric by Claudia Rankine (2014) in terms of Critical Race Theory (bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw), Memory Studies (Paul Connerton) and Feminist Resistance Theory. CRT study is the use of everyday racism and microaggression by Rankine; it is not an incident but a systemic power and intersectionality embedded in systemic power. The reason is in the fact that racial trauma is embedded in the consciousness of individuals and groups; the cultural memory as introduced by Connerton is the way fragmented lyric narratives serve as a repository of violence and survival. The how is clarified by the Feminist Resistance Theory which puts the emphasis on the second-person address, hybrid text form, and poetic fragmentation as the methods of opposing the hegemonic silencing and reasserting the political voice. The combination of these frameworks makes the argument that Citizen produces a poetics of survival where race, gender, and memory become united so as to fight structural racism and exaggerate marginalized subjectivities.*

***Keywords:*** Claudia Rankine, Critical Race Theory, memory, feminist resistance, poetics of survival, microaggressions.

## ***1. Introduction***

Citizen: An American Lyric by Claudia Rankine (2014) is among the most impactful pieces of modern-day American literature, which merges poetry, essay, visual art into a hybrid piece that is difficult to classify. It is not necessarily lyric or purely prose; it is a combination of several genres to reflect the real life of racism in the twenty-first century America. With the combination of narrative fragments, address to the second person, pictures, and references to a culture, Rankine manages to produce the text consisting of personal testimony and communal memory (Rankine, 2014). The importance of this hybridized form is that it reflects the fractured and fractious character of racial experience, which does not seek to provide the closure but prefigures the survival, resistance and the continuing struggle to be recognized (Johnson, 2017).

Citizen is culturally and politically relevant because it addresses the daily racism, macroaggressions and cultural trauma. The text shows how racism is not exclusive to open violence but it pervades everyday spaces, like sports arenas, classrooms, workplaces, even in conversations. Although these macroaggressions are small yet they create a cumulative wound, building upon both the personal subjectivity and general awareness (Sue, 2010). The relevance of

the work by Rankine is increased by the fact that it was published at a time when the murders of unarmed Black citizens took place, the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum, and the discussion of race and justice in America became more intense (Crockett, 2017). In that regard, *Citizen* is not simply an act of describing racism, but rather a kind of documenting, storing, and opposing it with the help of new poetic form (Shaw, 2018).

The key research issue of this article is the process of converting the experiences of racial aggression into a politics of survival which *Citizen* does. The text also is not a linear account of surviving but rather an example of survival as a continuous process that is determined by memory, fragmentation and resistance. It poses a number of research questions: what are the types of racial violence and macroaggressions that Rankine depicts, why are they retold and remembered in a lyrical form, and how the hybrid text itself is a form of resistance, reclaiming political voice?

The article relies on three theoretical perspectives to answer these questions: (1) interrelated. To conceptualize the mechanism of macroaggressions in the context of systemic power, the theories of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and, especially, the concept of intersectionality proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991) and the idea of the racialized gender oppression that bell hooks applied (hooks, 1989) help to understand. Memory Studies is based on the analysis of cultural memory created by Paul Connerton (Connerton, 1989) and is interested in how the trauma is marked in the fragmented narratives and the embodied memories. Lastly, Feminist Resistance Theory sheds light into how the lyric strategies of Rankine serve as survival and agency forces to turn vulnerability into resistance (hooks, 1990).

It is through a synthesis of these frameworks that this article is making the argument that *Citizen* produces a poetry of survival combining fragmented lyric memory with feminist resistance. By so doing, Rankine reveals racial injustice as well as restoring political voice to prevailing communities. This work does not just oppose dominant discourses of American identity, but also conventional borders to the work of literature, and poetry emerges as a crucial instrument of cultural memory and activist intervention in the present.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

The critical race theory gives a basis through which *Citizen* reveals the structural aspect of racism. CRT was developed within the legal field in the 1980s and explains that racism means not an aberration but an inherent and systemic fact of American society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). In her idea of intersectionality, Kimberlee Crenshaw (1991) underlines the impossibility of separating the issues of racism and the others as they are both caused by the same issues and influenced by the same phenomena together. Bell hooks (1989) also stresses that the problems of racial domination intersect with the problems of patriarchy, which cannot be considered independently of racism in the life of Black women.

The text by Rankine illustrates the insights of CRT, in that it reveals how seemingly minor acts of racism, including dismissive comments, stereotypical or even suspicious behavior in the public reflect a larger system of exclusion. These macroaggressions are everyday violence, which are cumulative (Sue, 2010). These address rules are further strengthened by the use of second-person address that entangles both the speaker and the reader in the dynamics of racism and the way in which it is perpetuated not just by laws and institutions but by the repetition of everyday gestures. Therefore, CRT enables *Citizen* to be understood as a poetic study of the case of how structural racism is reflected in everyday life.

## 2.2 Memory Studies

In case CRT is the structural what of racism, Memory Studies answers the why- why Rankine is determined to remember and document macroaggressions. Paul Connerton (1989) believes that social memory is incarnated and recorded in terms of repetitive practices, ritual and story. However, it is especially the trauma that interferes with the linear memory, bringing it back in junk and repetitions instead of unified whole (Caruth, 1996). This is demonstrated in the disjointed form of *Citizen* created by Rankine: the text is divided into lyric vignettes, visual imagery and narrative gaps, imitating the volatility of the memory. The silence and omissions reflect the lack of completeness of traumatic memory, and the revisiting some of these events, like the humiliation of Serena Williams by the crowd, shows how cultural memory forms in the minds of a group (Shaw, 2018). Rankine is in opposition to the cultural pressure to forget about racism because he frames it as something that should never be forgotten. Memory then gets to be a political act; the text which is in itself is an archive of Black experience, and it documents what is usually swept under the carpet by dominant narratives.

## 2.3 Feminist Resistance Theory

Whereas CRT and Memory Studies are anticipatory of systemic oppression and trauma, Feminist Resistance Theory offers the means to do so, how Rankine wants to turn vulnerability into agency. In the case of bell hooks (1990), the resistance starts with speaking back as a marginal in the reclaiming of subjectivity. Feminist opposition points out that survival is not just the persistence but an active rejection to be forgotten.

This opposition takes a form and speech in *Citizen*. The use of the second-person pronoun you addresses the issue at once in a generalized and personalized way and the reader is placed in the position of the victimized subjectivity. This is an approach that makes dominant readerships uncomfortable as they are forced to accept complicity (Johnson, 2017). In addition, the hybrid genre (poetry, essay, and visual art) breaks the conventional barriers of the literary field that tend to lock out the voices of the marginalized (Crockett, 2017). Even formal experimentation itself is already an act of resistance, which questions aesthetic conventions that favor Eurocentric lyric traditions.

Rankine is also a feminist fighter because she does not idealize her survival. In its place, she describes survival as an unending negotiation, full of exhaustion and anger, and silent spaces, but puts this survival as a political power. *Citizen* as a representation of making the disjointed memory a lyric voice is an act of talking back, a critical intervention to systems of domination that hooks (1989) defines as such.

## 3. Historical, Cultural Context.

The poem *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine (2014) is placed in a historical context of an environment of racial injustice and the continuation of racialized violence in the United States. Despite the demolition of the formal segregation by the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties, mass incarceration, police brutality, and macroaggression in everyday life have become visible in the twenty-first century (Alexander, 2012). This paradox is captured in *citizen*: on the one hand, America boasts equality and Black citizens still face the problem of structural exclusion and symbolic violence.

The main cultural backdrop to *Citizen* is the emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that became widely known following the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin and other cases where unarmed black individuals were killed by the police, including Michael Brown in Ferguson (Taylor, 2016). The mentions of police brutality and the need to remain silent by the

people that Rankine makes appeal to BLM in terms of the criticism of systemic racism and urge to acknowledge the issue. The book, despite being not a manifesto, is part of the cultural movement of racial justice because it records the lived experience and turns it into a poetic testimony.

Another critical concept that can be used to understand the cultural context is the concept of macroaggressions, popularized by Derald Wing Sue (2010). Such little, daily insults or rejections will amount to a major psychological and social damage. These moments in the text by Rankine are counted, when she is mistaken with another Black colleague or is suspected in the area or hears racist jokes, proving that these incidents contribute to creating bigger systems of inequality. The disorientation which such aggressions cause is reflected in the lyric mode that is fragmented and direct.

In addition, the book places itself in the context of cultural politics of sport and media. Rankine underlines the situation of Serena Williams whose career was constantly framed by racist and sexist judgments (Cahn, 2015). Through these examples, *Citizen* reveals the role of the popular culture in maintaining the stereotypes about black bodies as being unruly, threatening or excessive. Such cultural discourses consolidate hierarchies of the system, and resistance becomes urgent and challenging.

This historical moment is reflected in the hybridity of *Citizen*, which is a poetry, and at the same time, it is part essay, part visual archive. It is those critics who call it a disjointed race memory which owns the just breaches of past in the present (Shaw, 2018). This is how Rankine grounds her lyric voice in the constant struggle to be heard; as such, the text becomes more than a mere literary product but rather a cultural documentation of the racial politics of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **4. Textual Analysis: Poetics of Survival.**

An American Lyric by Claudia Rankine is neither a pure poetry collection nor it is a linear essay. It is a hybrid form that indicates disintegration, disjunction and repetition. Such hybridity reflects the shattered race and life of modern America. Through second-person narrative, visual artistic expression, and fragmented memories, *Citizen* inspires what it can call poetics of survival writing conditions that document trauma from racism but doesn't yield to its erasures.

##### **4.1 Daily Racism and Macroaggressions**

*Citizen* deals squarely with the issue of everyday racism and macroaggressions. Sue (2010) defines macroaggressions as subtle and often inadvertent insults or dismissals of members of marginalized groups. Rankine pins down these experiences with disarming accuracy: the office mate who confuses one black individual for the other; the friend who keeps making racist jokes; or the person who eyes her purse askance. The examples are few and are not really very big by themselves, but together they form what hooks (1989) describes as a lived experience of domination. As an example, such a continuous repetition of the second-person pronoun makes the reader contest into the role of the victim: You are in the dark, in the car, as the black-tarred street is swallowed by speed; he tells you that his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there, he tells you (Rankine, 2014, p. 10). This type of rhetorical tactic makes the reader suspect by breaking down the barrier between the viewer and the object under scrutiny. In this, Rankine dramatizes the way racism is perpetuated, not only through overt violence but through language as well. Critical Race Theory can be used to conceptualize these episodes as structural and not accidental. Racism, according to Crenshaw (1991), is interwoven with other types of inequality in order to create lived experiences. The portraits of Rankine show that these aggressions are not the accidents of a slip but symptoms of the system, a system of deeply rooted hierarchies of race and privilege



#### **4.2 Fragmented Memory and Traumatic Repetition**

The shape of *Citizen* is the trauma and memory psychology. According to trauma theorists such as Caruth (1996), trauma interferes with the narrative coherence, and as such, it returns as fragments, silences and repetitions. The text of Rankine does not lend itself to a linear narrative, but rather vignettes, haphazard narratives, abrupt interruptions, plays out the disorientation of racial trauma. A very good example is the multiple references of Serena Williams made by Rankine. Throughout multiple pages, the events in the career of Williams, including controversial umpiring decisions, unfriendly press treatment, and racist attacks, reappear in disjointed portions. They are not simply a sports anecdote but traumatic cultural memories, which are repeated due to the fact that they are a representation of the whole cultural police of Black bodies (Cahn, 2015). Returning to Williams, again and again, Rankine proves the argument of Connerton (1989), that memory is socially inscribed by means of repetition and performance. It is cumulative: each fragment weighs down the previous one, producing the impression of endless repetition. The memory of injustice is not gone, it is there and re-emerging, it needs to be recalled. In that way, *Citizen* is a cultural archive, whereby experiences that are mostly obliterated by mainstream histories are preserved.

#### **4.3 The Second Person Pronoun as Resistance.**

The constant feminist resistance strategy of Rankine is the application of the second person pronoun, you. Rather than addressing the reader with the first person pronoun, Rankine addresses the reader with the second person pronoun to make the experience universal, involving both Black readers (who can identify with it) and white readers (who might feel uncomfortable). This pronoun dislocates the demarcations of speaker, subject, and audience, as Johnson (2017) insists, and establishes an uncomfortable intimacy that cannot be ignored.

Feminist Resistance Theory places more focus on the strength of voice when reclaiming agency (hooks, 1990). Rankine rejects the use of singular I to speak thus eliminating and at the same time replicating subjectivity, demonstrating that racial trauma is not only an individual issue but a collective one. The poet himself, and the reader and the witness and the survivor. By doing so, language can be turned into a response of resistance and silence into a witness.

#### **4.4 Hybridity of Form, Poetry, Essay, Visual Archive.**

The other important aspect of the resistance of Rankine is the hybrid *Citizen*. Besides the lyric fragments, the book consists of the essays and visual art. Text is shown together with images like works of contemporary art, and documentary photographs, and this disrupts the line between literature and archive. According to Crockett (2017), this hybridity also challenges the aesthetic conventions of Eurocentric lyric poetry, the aesthetic tradition that has tended to value unity, closure, and coherence. The use of visual art (the photograph of the Jena Six or the pictures of police brutality) make the lyric voice more based on the historical and cultural reality. The contrast of the poetic fragments and documentary evidence represents what Shaw (2018) refers to a poetics of witness. Even the form is an act of survival, not wanting to be confined to one genre but insisting on multiplicity as a way of resistance.

#### **4.5 Survival as political Strength.**

Finally, *Citizen* also depicts survival as not a passive endurance but as a resistance. Rankine does not deny the experience of exhaustion, anger, and silence as a part of the survival process: Since you are of the elite due to a year of travel, you are on the front line. A man bangs into you in his passage with his tray. You run to him and he says to you to get away off him (Rankine, 2014, p. 131). The cumulative amount of such experiences testifies to the mental weight of racism.

However, by documenting and reworking these fragments into lyric writing, Rankine makes the survival a form of talking back, or what hooks (1989) would call a form of critical intervention, interfering with domination.

In this case, survival is not romantic. It is disorganized, torn and sore. But here is political power in its exact expression. In writing these experiences, Rankine does not erase himself, there is existence, in the face of a culture that is always trying to shut it down. The song can be seen as a document and a defense - a form of surviving and at the same time rebelling.

### **Summary of Textual Analysis.**

With this scattered arrangement, *Citizen* embodies the poetics of survival as the trauma is documented from one vantage and resisted from another. CRT sheds light on the forces acting on micro-aggressions as Rankine describes; Memory Studies explains that the fragmented structure is precisely a manifestation of the presence of trauma; and Feminist Resistance Theory describes how the lyric voice transfers vulnerability into agency. All in all, these perspectives make a strong case that *Citizen* is not merely a work of literature but a political act that restores memory, discloses injustice, and reinterprets survival as resistance.

## **5. Critical Discussion**

The *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine has been hailed as one of the most seminal publications of the American literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its combination with hybridity and the focus on daily racism have been viewed with controversy both in the academic literature culture and in politics and social justice activism. This discourse places the work of Rankine in the context of three discussions interconnected in their focus; race and systemic injustice, memory and cultural trauma, and feminist resistance.

### **5.1 Race and Systemic Injustice**

*Citizen* is a good example of the use of literature as social commentary in terms of Critical Race Theory. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) believe that the aim of CRT is to reveal the banal nature of racism. This is exactly what Rankine does: rather than describing only the instances of violence on the grand scale, she records the less evident yet no less damaging instances of exclusion, stereotyping, and rejection. In so doing, she puts into the limelight that which is customary.

But, critics have reported strains in this method. Others suggest that the accumulation of macroaggressions could harm the reader by being too much without any obvious way of changing (Shaw, 2018). But this non-resolution can also be deliberate, as it is the continuation of racial trauma without making it simple. In doing so, *Citizen* opposes the narrative resolution that white viewers may wish to see, highlighting instead the persistence of structural inequality.

### **5.2 Memory, Trauma, and Cultural Archive**

The other major dispute within this extended text is that of memory. Memory is both Individual and collective, developed as embodied practice, according to Connerton (1989). Rankine's text is a cultural repository in which all the experiences of racism would have otherwise been forgotten. Critics like C. Shaw (2018) argue that *Citizen* transforms broken memories into a political form of testimony that denies the cultural amnesiac covers of racial violence. The historical dimension that this raises concerns the relationship between literary and historical texts themselves. Should *Citizen*, then, be termed an instance of poetry, memoir or history? These boundaries are troubled in the text, which is consistent with the thought of Caruth (1996) that the expression of trauma is only possible in indirect fragmented forms. The rejection of linear narrative by Rankine points to the fact that the issue of racial trauma is not in the past but manifests itself in the present. In this respect, her work does not only document, it also performs memory.

#### **5.4 Feminist Resistance, Poetics of Voice.**

Feminist critics would observe that through its ability to speak back to marginalization, *Citizen* embodies resistance; bell hooks (1989) refers to this talk back as one of the radical measures available to marginalized communities; Rankine, however, would compel readers to occupy the space of the second person. As Johnson (2017) has stated, the pronoun disturbs readers, forcing them to identify it and become uncomfortable. Through subtly bridging the pronoun with theories of feminist resistance tied to voice, bodily experience, and an exercise in resistance to being silenced, the plan substantiates itself.

Meanwhile, Rankine makes resistance a challenge by not ignoring exhaustion. Existence is portrayed as fragmented, tiresome and incomplete. This is an echo of what Audre Lorde (1984) wrote that in oppressive situations, even to survive is a form of resistance. Not idealizing survival, as Rankine does, proves that survival in the racism is a burden and a kind of agency.

#### **5.4 Extended Cultural Implication.**

By putting *Citizen* in the context of greater discussions, one can see the dual role of this book it fulfills: it is both a piece of literature and political intervention. Following the mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement, the text has been used in the classroom, activist groups, and in popular discourse as a means of bringing awareness about racism (Taylor, 2016). However, it is not only an activist influence but a challenge to traditions in literature. Rankine as a blend of a lyric, an essay, and an image transcends the confines of the genre, and in doing so, she shows how formal experimentation even can be an act of provocation against the Eurocentric norms (Crockett, 2017).

*Citizen*, therefore, is involved in more broad discussions regarding the connection between art and politics. Instead of providing easy answers, it represents what Gilroy (2004) can describe as the politics of transfiguration: the power of Black cultural forms to produce new modes of seeing, remembering and resistance.

#### **Conclusion of Discussion**

The controversies about *Citizen* reveal the depth and the multidimensionality of poetics of survival by Rankine. Revealing the mundaneness of racism, turning memory into testimony, and re-conceptualizing resistance in a fragmented voice, the text disrupts the hegemonic narratives and reaffirms the marginalized subjectivities. What makes it so important is not only that it represents racial trauma but also official innovations, because they demand that survival, memory and resistance cannot be separated.

#### **6. Conclusion**

*Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine shows how poetry can also be a witness and protest against the racism in the system. Due to a synthesis of lyric fragments, visual art, and the reflective essay, Rankine builds a poetics of survival that documents the day to day experiences of racial trauma, but then turns them in resistance. The text highlights the fact that racism is not episodic only but rather a part and parcel of the daily life routine in the United States and occurs as macroaggressions, cultural representations, and silences.

The text demonstrates the intersectional and structural aspects of racism through Critical Race Theory, in which macroaggressions can build up to cause systemic violence (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Memory Studies throws light on the fragmented form of Rankine as an implication of the endurance of trauma and the need to remember as a political corrective to the eradication of culture (Connerton, 1989; Caruth, 1996). According to the Feminist Resistance Theory, *The Citizen* regains agency of voice transformation and through representative second-

person narration, hybridity, and testimony to exert resistance in the very spaces heretofore dominated by silence (hooks, 1989; Lorde 1984).

What is important about the *Citizen* is that it will not lay claim to final definition. Far from closure, this text is a close reflection to the incessant and boundless nature of racial injustice- a situation calling forth recognition, in confrontation with the 'normalized' audiences who wish to find relief or redemption, to pose a negotiation of Black survival- for that matter, survival in general, as an ongoing process. Being in existence becomes here and now an affair of some political power: disjointed, worn-out, and yet indestructible.

*Citizen* is held up as a historical and a cultural note when it comes to the politics of race in the 21st century. The book remains enjoined with some contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter, presenting itself as an aesthetic and political intervention. Rankine shows the power of art to bring resistance: it never merely rehashes reality; it may transform memory, disrupt silence, and actually cause resistance. Thus, *Citizen* is exemplary of those prophetic works that delineate literature as a place of and for the survival of voice and memory.

## References

- Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.
- Cahn, S. K. (2015). *Coming on strong: Gender and sexuality in women's sport* (2nd ed.). University of Illinois Press.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Crockett, Z. (2017). *The rise of Black Lives Matter: Contexts and cultural politics*. Routledge.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). NYU Press.
- Gilroy, P. (2004). *After empire: Melancholia or convivial culture?* Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black*. South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. South End Press.
- Johnson, E. (2017). The poetics of race and trauma in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. *Journal of American Studies*, 51(4), 1130–1148.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.
- Rankine, C. (2014). *Citizen: An American lyric*. Graywolf Press.
- Shaw, C. (2018). Fragmented memory and racial grief in *Citizen*. *Contemporary Literature*, 59(3), 301–325.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Wiley.
- Taylor, K.-Y. (2016). *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation*. Haymarket Books.