

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Theme of Resistance to Racial and Gender Oppression in the Selected Poems of Maya Angelou

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Article History: Submitted-09/03/2017, Revised-08/04/2017, Accepted-11/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

Abstract:

The purpose of the present paper is to focus upon the theme of resistance to racial and gender oppression as reflected in the selected poems of Maya Angelou. Resistance to racism and gender discrimination is discernible in most of Maya Angelou works. The paper examines a few of her poems that question the racial and patriarchal hegemony and attempt a reinvention of black female identity so that a non discriminating society may be formed on the basis of racial, social, sexual and economic equality. Maya Angelou's poetry thus is not merely a rhythmic collection of words; rather it becomes a call for action against injustice. Through her poems, Angelou attempts to challenge the conventional male-centric prejudiced portrayals of woman and replace them with authentic, real, alive selves. She uses her writing as a tool for resisting against and altering those ideologies, hegemonies and methodologies that have silenced and marginalised black women. The paper examines how her lyrical body of work challenges the 'othering' of black woman on the basis of race and gender and strives to force a change in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Resistance, Race, Gender, Patriarchy, Hegemony.

Introduction:

Maya Angelou (1928-2014), hailed as "the black woman's poet laureate" by reviewer Elsie B. Washington, carved her niche in the hearts of people as a chronicler of her own life, as dancer, film producer, television producer, playwright, actress, civil rights activist, film director and above all as a poet. In 1970s, Angelou published her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and "its success signal" [led] the existence of a market for works by black women." (Gates, 2016). She is also known for her long poem "On the Pulse of Morning" which she was invited to read out at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in

1993. Lyman. B. Hagen aptly points out that Angelou “has always had a dedicated audience...At her public readings, a generally balanced cross-section, male and female, black and white, are in attendance. Some admirers of her poetry have been so impressed with its rhymes, rhythms, and content that they themselves have been encouraged to write” (Hagen,118) Angelou thus has continued to inspire generation of poets, artists and even ordinary people. She has produced a number of collections of poetry, her popular volumes of poetry are *‘Just Give me a Cool Drink Of Water ‘for I Dillie’*(1971), *And Still I Rise* (1987),*The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1993), *Phenomenal Woman* (1994), *A Brave And Startling Truth*(1995), etc.

In order to appreciate Angelou’s contribution to the emergence of a woman centric narrative in black literature, it is important to first understand the world she was writing in. Towards the late sixties and into the seventies, African American literature became focussed more and more on asserting an Afro-centric identity attempting to renew links with African culture and sensibility. Alongside there was a great surge in black women’s writing with a number of black women insisting on being heard and taken seriously not only in the mainstream, but also within the black community. The strong yearning of these black women writers was to express themselves on their own terms as also to resolve the contradictions between their stereotypical images as constructed by the world outside and their real selves. As Ajuan Maria Mance rightly states “Writing both as African American and as women, Black women poets of the late twentieth century renegotiated those “assumptions about identity” that understood anti-racist action and thought in terms of the interests of African American males”(Mance ,123) This however was not acceptable to poets such as Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez and many others who instead chose to write poems expressing specific women’s issues and acute sense of marginalisation which they experienced on daily basis. As Jap Preet Kaur Bhangu rightly says, “ Revolting against the essentially male, patriarchal nature of black nationalistic ideologies, these writers represented a community of women who strongly objected to both- the exclusion of black women from the black political movement and the pressure to sacrifice gender issues for racial concerns” (Bhangu, 118). The present paper examines how Angelou’s poems become a site of resistance to the forces of patriarchal and racial control.

Angelou’s poems are platform to champion the cause of all black women. Her works have been duly noted for their empowerment of the female voice. The focus on women’s space led to her moving away from the surrounding predominantly male, angry voices of protest. Rather she took upon herself the responsibility to refute hegemonic, malignant, negative stereotypical images that the society perpetuated about black womanhood. Angelou thus put into practice what bell hooks in her book succinctly stipulates, “It is essential for African American women to recognise the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to understand the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create counter-hegemony to take action” (hooks 2000:16). Angelou’s work very well demonstrates such usage.

Angelou, in her poems, repeatedly draws from personal traumas and struggles to give voice to black woman’s concerns. Her poems put the African American womanhood at the

centre beyond the traditional boundaries that have always relegated them at the lowest margins. She uses her personal voice and does not hesitate to talk about herself. No doubt, her voice stands for the whole community but at the same time she also claims her right of speaking as an individual. As Mary Jane Lupton remarks, “Her sizeable body of poetry is relevant to her autobiographical themes and has greatly contributed to her popularity as a contemporary writer” (Lupton,48). Her poems, like her autobiographies, emerge as a response to a difficult and challenging childhood and provide lessons and wisdom gained during her struggles and hardships. She writes about her own experiences to set an example for others to overcome obstacles and challenges with perseverance and dignity.

The most famous poem of Maya Angelou is “Caged Bird” which is a part of her collection *Oh Shaker Why Don't You Sing*. The title of the poem was adapted from the poem “Sympathy” by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the celebrated African American poet. Written towards the end of the Civil rights movement, Angelou in her poem talks about the dehumanising racial segregation and gender discrimination of black women in the American society. She compares the struggles of a bird in confinement with the plight of black Americans especially black women. She enhances the contrast by juxtaposing the images of a free bird and a caged one. The poet says,

The caged bird sings with
 A fearful trill of things unknown
 But longed for still and his
 Tune is heard on the distant hill
 For the caged bird sings of freedom (Angelou 1986:183)

In the poem, caged bird is a symbol of the black people, especially black women who are denied freedom, justice and equality on the basis of race and gender. During slavery black women faced violence at the hands of their white masters and also become victim of sexual abuse. Even though slavery has been long over, the prejudicial cultural logic at work continues to perpetuate oppression of black people. As Hariher Kulkarni aptly writes in this context, “The brutal treatment that the black women received during slavery invariably left profound scars on their psyche...the external forces operating at the socioeconomic levels came to bear an unmistakable relationship to the internal fears, worries, anxieties and feelings of inadequacy and frustration” (Kulkarni 1999: 59).

Maya talks about several barriers that remain between whites and blacks. In the opening lines of the poem Angelou uses words such as Breeze, fat worms etc. that portray the white society as selfish and caring more about wealth than black's plights and sufferings. Angelou has always been a victim of racial insult in her life. She as well as other blacks have suffered a lot due to racism. Thus the poem is an extended metaphor of racial segregation present in society. The same experience of racial insult is recorded in her autobiography *I*

Know Why The Caged Bird Sings When Momma takes Maya to the town's white dentist, he humiliates his black patients by saying that he'd rather put his "hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (160).

The poem reflects the sufferings, frustrations and humiliations that black women suffer in the American society on daily basis. She, like the caged bird in confinement, always dreams of the day when it will gain freedom. Angelou not only speaks of what she experiences as an African American but also as a woman. Black women have been traditionally expected to remain subservient to their men, always expected to support their dreams and aspirations. In addition they are also expected to act as cushion to enable their men to take out their frustrations and failures faced in a racist society. Thus this objectification of woman has had a devastating effect on their physical, mental, moral as well as intellectual well being. Gloria Wada Gayles aptly describes the gap, which is a reality of American society. There is a large circle in which white people, most of the men, experience influence and power, far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space in which black people regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black woman experience pain, isolation and vulnerability" (Gayles 1984, 7)

Thus existing at the lowest levels in terms of availability of facilities and options, black women need to fight harder and more constantly before they can dream to come at par within the community as also in society. In her autobiography, Angelou narrates one of her bitter experiences of life in one of her autobiographies when she was raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. The rape, trial and consequent murder of the rapist resulted in her self-imposed silence for five years. Angelou herself became a caged bird as Lupton aptly relates, "For five years she is mute, locked in a speechless body, as she has willed it." (Lupton 1998, 67). Thus black women have always faced oppression in the outside world as also within their own homes that becomes unbearable, as hooks states, "It is obvious that most Black men are not in positions that allow them to exert the kind of institutionalized patriarchal power and control over Black women's lives that privileged white men do in this society. But it is undeniable that they do exert a lot of power over Black women and children in everyday life" (hooks, 124)

Angelou, as also other black women writers, articulates anger, disappointment, jealousy and frustration through her poems. Her poems become an account of pathetic conditions under which the black woman has had to live and survive. Having no one to protect her, she stands alone in this wide world. She has to satisfy the economic needs of the family as also to impart a sense of values and culture to the children. Thus she leads the life of a dehumanized creatures moving through darkness without any centre of existence. Her personal issues and yearning as a woman thus have to be sacrificed in her struggle for survival.

Another poem by Angelou “Still I Rise” conveys a strong message for black women. The poem is permeated with a notion of black woman asserting her strength and courage in spite of suffering pain and humiliation in the masculine world. She says:

You may write me down in history

with your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise. (Angelou 1986:154)

The poem consists of seven stanzas of four lines each, and a longer ending stanza of fifteen lines' length. The poet stresses upon the essence of women's struggle in fighting against male dominated society. Having herself risen in spite of several odds in her life, Angelou in the poem, encourages every woman to overcome obstacles and live to their potential. In his seminal work, *Black Autobiography in America* (1974), Stephan Butterfield aptly describes Maya Angelou as one who “does not submit tamely to the cage. She is repeatedly thrust into situations where she must act on her own initiative to save herself and thereby learns the strength of self-confidence.” (29). Angelou's women in her poems become strong and self-assertive only after going through several bitter experiences of life.

Angelou, like her grandmother, does not let herself get entangled for long in self pity and feelings of helplessness. Rather her voice soars in optimum and is full of positive energy. Bell hooks strongly affirms, “The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves- to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew, our words are not without meaning they are an action- a resistance” (hooks, 28) Angelou necessitates the destruction of all systems of oppression of black women.

Through the poem, Angelou lays bare how she was able to overcome racism, criticism, sexism and personal obstacles in her life with pride and grace. The poem constitutes the embodiment of her sufferance, vitality and spiritual strength. She uses strong imagery in the poem to emphasise upon the deeper meaning of life. The imagery is transmitted through the use of similes and metaphors. The use of figurative language shows us a very clear picture of what the poet means. Angelou uses several similes such as moon and sun in the poem to describe black women. She emphasises that black woman rises like moon and sun everyday in spite of so many trials and tribulations in life. She says:

You may shoot me with your word,

Cut me with your lies

And kill me with your hatefulness

But, still like air, I will Rise. (Angelou1986:154)

In the lines, Angelou shows her faith in the courage and strength of Black woman who will be able to put off this burden of discrimination from her shoulders. In her autobiography she says, “We must replace fear and chauvinism, hate, timidity and apathy, which flow in our national spinal column with courage, sensitivity, perseverance and ... love. And by love I mean the condition in the human spirit so profound it encourages us to develop courage” (Angelou, 132). Thus this poem is a call for assertiveness and pride for black women. It is an evident resistance to passivity and alienation. It is an outcry to the humiliation; preconception and constant thrashing black women have been subjected to. Bell hooks aptly describes, “If any female feels she need anything beyond herself to legitimate and validate her existence, she is already giving away her power to be self-defining, her agony” (Hooks, 95). In the poem Angelou assumes the power to incite black women to rise and stop lamentation and defy their oppressors, raise their heads, and make their presence felt.

“Equality” is another poem having powerful and strong tone describing the poet’s desire of equality. She craves for equality in every sphere; gender equality, racial equality, equal treatment regardless of a person’s age and socioeconomic status. The use of the first person in the poem suggests that the person is a black woman. Stephan Henderson rightly says, “The ‘I’ of black poetry is not a singular or individualistic reference but a symbol for the ideas of black collective.” (Henderson 1988, 38). While referring to the second party as ‘you’ the persona is seeking freedom from someone who has authority. Thus ‘you’ could suggest an individual or the entire dominating majority with immense authority and influence to preside over the systematic racial/gender discrimination. The theme of equality is conveyed through repetition and several other poetic techniques such as metaphors, rhyme, assonance and consonance. The poet utilises repetition to place emphasis on the urgent need for freedom. The persona is a strong advocate of equality and hopes for the day when the oppressed people will be free of negative judgements. Maya wants male oriented society to treat black woman equally and justly. She cries out for the equality of black woman through the repetition of the line “equality and I will be free.” The poet talks about “drums that beat out the message and the rhythms never change.” This expression is metaphorical in nature and alludes to a society that looks at the sufferings of a cross section of people differently. The poem reverberated with the image of the speaker beating out the rhythms of her message and never giving up. She wants to be heard. She wants to be equal in the mind of the listener. The listener in the poem may continue to ignore her, but the audience can not escape its echoing loudness and clarity. Angelou thus once again reinforces optimism in the heart of her readers/listeners.

“Phenomenal Woman” is another great inspiring poem of Angelou and one of her most famous ones. The poet through this melody glorifies the inner beauty of the black woman which makes her phenomenal. The "Phenomenal woman" according to Angelou, "should be tough, tender, laugh as much as possible, the struggle for equality continues unabated” (Angelou 1993: 7). The poet gives a message of self confidence, pride and courage to the black woman and warns the male dominated society not to underestimate the power of black woman. She says:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them
They think I'm telling lies. (Angelou 1986:121)

The poem is written in free verse enabling the poet to inculcate her ideas of inner strength and beauty without any interruption. Although the language used is simple, it has underlying means which signifies the inner beauty of a black woman. The poet stresses upon the fact that a woman's beauty, grace and power comes from her intrinsic womanliness. The author uses imagery in the poem to describe physical appearance of a confident and empowered woman. In the first stanza, she enumerates: "It's in the reach of my arms, The span of my hips, The stride of my step, The curl of my lips" (121). The poet is very confident and proud of her physical appearance and is not ashamed of her black skin. Angelou thus refuses to conform to the white standards of beauty and feels joy in her own sensuousness.

Throughout the poem she explains why black woman is phenomenal, extraordinary, prodigious and different. She explains one by one all her physical features, her hair, lips, body curves. She describes the women's behaviour and body gestures. Her words contain imagery of a proud woman who carries herself magnificently with grace and dignity. In the second stanza, the speaker continues to enumerate the charms of her femininity which overwhelms men. She compares the men who "swarm" around the speaker to "a hive of honey bees". Here Angelou discusses the spell she seems to have over the men. This idea continues into the third stanza, where Angelou taunts that even men cannot find out what it is about her that so tempts and allures men towards her. She says:

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery. (Angelou 1986:122)

Thus she remains a mystery to men. They are unable to understand that her true beauty lies in her very being. For Angelou, beauty does not need to be classified by the shape of her body, colour or any other physical attributes. True beauty lies in the power of self-determination of black woman that carries power to endure the pain and the courage to sacrifice. Each of the four stanzas in the poem closes with the lively refrain:

I'm a woman
Phenomenally
Phenomenal woman.

That's me (Angelou 1986: 121)

To emphasize her main point, the poet uses repetition throughout the poem to bind it together. Her voice is the voice of a strong woman that helps to empower woman.

To sum up, Maya Angelou's poetry is a celebration of as well as a call to the black woman's power and strength to continue to resist against and survive the male prejudice at social, political as well as psychological levels, in addition to racism. Her poetry is infused with a wide spectrum of themes including love, death, pain, sufferings, displacement, masculine prejudice, sexism, etc. However, Angelou's dream is to be in a society where race and gender do not become negative values. In her poems she seeks to dismantle the stereotypical images of black woman as inferior, sexually- abused and morally- fallen creatures. Her poems create and fill an empty space, managing to squeeze among the surrounding loud, male voices of black protest, which hardly leave any room for a woman's expression of identity. Her work incorporates material from her life, her readings and her cultural and social experiences. Her way of resistance is not as aggressive and rebellious as that of Amir Baraka or Nikki Giovanni; this however is not to undermine the impact she has had on African American psyche. While Angelou's poetry speaks directly to the black people and appeals to the heart, it has universal appeal also. Angelou addresses the universal issues in her poem that women face daily, pertaining to their bodies as well as minds. She puts the focus on sexual abuse, rape, abortion as well as the longings for freedom and equality. Even as women in the audience relate to these experiences and use the inspiration to release certain negative energies, replacing them with positive ones, the men too find their horizons broader, learning to see things from a different perspective. Angelou's poetry thus indicates ways by which society may transform itself into a kinder and a just world.

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