

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

Remembering Harlem: Cultural Past and Identity Reconstruction in Select Works of Margaret Walker Alexander and Maya Angelou

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Article History: Submitted-05/04/2017, Revised-21/04/2017, Accepted-22/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

Abstract:

The nostalgia of a glorious past and the reality of the oppression under white supremacy have been the links that connect the African American people with their literature. In history, Harlem Renaissance is recorded as the massive exodus of people from the South to the urban North, the celebration of blackness with a new found 'New Negro' identity, poetry, music, art and literature. Writing specially poetry has become the main tool of self expression and resistance. This paper analyzes the select poems of Margaret Walker and Maya Angelou and how they depict the transition from common themes like the stigma attached to the skin colour, black self assertion against white supremacy and the legacy of the past to the identity reconstruction of the African American women embedded in the cultural past.

Keywords: "New Negro", Cultural Past, Identity Reconstruction.

Writing: the act of voicing one's anger, the act of purgation, the act of making one feel proud of who they are, the act that makes one aware of one's culture- its antiquity and its richness, is a tool that can bring change to an individual and to a whole race. When a race, hitherto stifled by the stigma attached to their skin dismantled themselves from the clutches of all forms of oppression to find solace in the act of writing- in history it is called Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem- the subject and metaphor for writing as resistance, rebirth of art, imagination, protest, celebration of race, blackness, individuality, a new "vogue", has been recorded in history as an event that connects the rich cultural past of the African Americans embedded in racial oppressions with the new found liberated identity that the black man enjoyed for a short period. The metamorphosis of Harlem from a "geographical space" to the cult of "the New Negro", has given the black community an unquestionable position in the world of literature. The swift and unexpected exodus of the blacks from the South to the Urban North has changed the way the Americans had looked down upon the blacks.

Harlem Renaissance can be defined as:

A period of remarkable creativity in literature, music, dance, painting and sculpture by the African- Americans, from the end of the First World War in 1917 through the 1920s. In the course of the mass migrations to the urban North in order to escape the legal segregation of American South- and also in order to take advantage of the jobs open to African-Americans at the beginning of the War- the population of the region

of Manhattan known as Harlem became almost exclusively black, and developed into the vital centre of African-American culture-America. (Abrams 126)

Harlem renaissance is exactly the rebirth of thus far silenced community, subdued by the colour of their skin. For Alain Locke, Harlem Renaissance is the transformation of the 'Old Negro', who is 'more of a myth than a man' to the 'New Negro' with a new 'social understanding' and self pride, and "the pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem" (Locke 5). Putting it succinctly, it is a montage of culture, art, poetry, music, literature and liberation.

During Harlem Renaissance, writing, particularly poetry, has become the main tool of self expression and resistance. The early twentieth century black man has found poetry as his mouthpiece to voice the unparalleled oppression he experienced under White supremacy. Without a doubt, the rebirth of the 'New Negro' has resulted in a plethora of works, especially poetry that celebrated the antiquity and legacy of the African American past.

The name, Langston Hughes has become synonymous with Harlem Renaissance poetry. For him, "it was the period when the Negro was in vogue" (Langston 228). Though the cultural movement has gifted the literary world with many numbers of writers like Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, Zora Neal Hurston, it's Langston Hughes who stands out with his unusual candour and fluid poetic style. Through poems, Langston Hughes explains how old and rich in reality the history of black civilization is. The White has manipulated the history to erase the Africans of the past, but each black man's consciousness is filled with an immense pride in their culture and history and they revisit it to recreate their once lost identity. One among the many examples is the poem "The Negro Speaks of the Rivers".

"The Negro Speaks of the Rivers" celebrates a young man's awareness of his history, the antiquity of his race's past and the legacy of his forefathers. The cradle of all civilizations- 'river' becomes the subject and metaphor of this poem. The young poet Langston Hughes through the refrain 'I have known rivers', asserts his identity firmly rooted in the cultural past of the Africans. The conscious effort from the poet's side to link the present with the past- the past that reveals how old and rich the African Civilization is- by depicting his oneness with the rivers. The ancient past of the African Civilization is much older than the human race itself. The poet says: "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins" (3).

The four rivers mentioned in the poem are: Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi. Rivers, the Euphrates and the Congo, where civilizations thrived and prospered are known to the poet. He has become one with it. On the banks of the river Congo, the second longest river in Africa, poet has built a hut and the calmness of the river lulled him to sleep. With the reference to the Nile and the Mississippi, come the topic of oppression and slavery. The person who bathed in the waters of the Euphrates, who slept in a hut on the banks of the Congo is now looking at the Nile and the pyramids- the result of the enormous hard work of

the common people. The journey Abraham Lincoln took in his late teenage and early twenties through the river Mississippi made him realise the harsh realities of slavery and the atrocities faced by his fellow beings. The acts of looking “upon the Nile” and listening to the “singing of the Mississippi” have made the poet comprehend the suffering of his people. He connects himself with all the downtrodden, marginalised faces of the world and thus celebrates universal brotherhood. The pain, the suffering and the oppression at the hands of the powerful is both individual and universal. But the poet knows the antiquity of his race. The rivers he talks about are ancient and dusky like the skin colour of his race. “I’ve known rivers:/ Ancient, dusky rivers” (11-12).

The poem is the self proclamation of the poet’s pride in his race. He traces its roots back to the origin of great civilizations to make people aware about the antiquity of his race. It’s a celebration of the history of the blacks. It’s an attempt to define the present by tracing the rich ancient past of himself and his people and reaffirming the oneness he feels with his race and its culture. The line “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” (4 and 13), repeated twice in the poem reveals the poet’s awareness about his past and how proud he is about his roots.

The antiquity and the richness of the African civilization are depicted in the poem. The reference to the four rivers that have witnessed the rise and fall of great African Civilization, the poet’s identification of himself, with his ancestry and ancestors, and the closeness of the community with nature helps the poetic persona to mould a new identity glued with the past. It is the history that defines the present and the future. Looking at the cultural past, the ‘New Negro’ reconstructs his/her identity that has been made insignificant by the Whites.

Dwarfed by the popularity of male poets, the contributions of women poets in the renaissance of the African Americans are rarely recognised. Georgia Douglas Johnson, Gwendolyn Bennett, Anne Spence among others explored the black woman’s consciousness, her sense of loneliness, the richness of their culture and all kinds of feminine themes through their writings. Their poems are a sort of triple protest: against patriarchy within the African American culture, against the white domination and against the western notions of feminism fondled by the White American women.

The poet who acted as a bridge to connect the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance with the future African American women writers to continue the tradition of female writing was none other than Margaret Walker Alexander. The most famous of her work is *For My People*, a collection of poems. When artists and intellectuals had migrated to the urban North, Alexander writes nostalgically and candidly about the inequality, discrimination and oppression of the African Americans of the South. An active member of the Black Chicago Renaissance, Alexander’s poetry depicts the legacy of the past wrapped in slavery and violence. Drawing from the past, she tries to reconstruct the lost identity.

Three poems: “Sorrow Home”, “Southern Song” and “I Want to Write” by Margaret Walker Alexander are odes to the natural beauty of the South and the poet’s ardent nostalgic wish to go back to the South to celebrate her culture and her people.

The poem “Sorrow Home” revolves around the poet’s insatiable desire to go back to her roots. The title of the poem itself brings to the reader the heaviness the speaker feels in her heart to go back to her home. Here, home is not merely a physical structure, it is beyond that; it is the culture that she left behind, it is the nature that she left behind, it is the people that she left behind and it is the home that she left behind. The usual association of home with happiness is swapped, and for the speaker, home is a symbol of sorrow. The displacement from the Southern homeland forces the poet to call her home “Sorrow Home”.

The poem starts with a declaration. A declaration that is both personal and political. She makes it clear that her cultural roots and her bond with the Southern past are deeper than that of the great African American activists like John Brown- the abolitionist who tried hard to abolish the practise of slavery through violence, Nat Turner- the Afro- American hero who stimulated the revolt to free the black slaves, who himself is a slave and the “southern hero” Robert Lee- the American General. The lines in the second stanza, “...I belong with the smell of fresh pine/ with the trail of coon/and the spring growth of wild onion”(4-5) reveals the ‘speaker’ pride in asserting her identity. The ‘tropic world’ is where the speaker is born and brought up. She makes it clear that she belongs to a tropic world where there are cotton fields, tobacco and cane. The suffocation she feels inside the ‘steam- heated flats’ enclosed with steel, wood and brick and the music of EI and subway is compared to that of a ‘hothouse bulb’. She rejects her present sophisticated way of living to “...walk along with the sacks of seed to drop in fallow ground” (9). Her eagerness to be a part of the way of life she once left behind forces her to end the poem with the longing to be one with it. The speaker is sure that the change is imminent and so soon she will be embracing her Southern land whose “warm skies and gulf blue streams are in my (her) blood” (4). The question that she asks in the end reveals the reason behind the separation of the poet from her land and it is sheer hatred. She is not sure how long she will be distanced from her land, but the question itself brings a hint on a radical change that is going to happen soon. The poet brings life to her cultural past to find meaning and identity in her new “hothouse bulb” life.

The theme, of glorifying the past experiences by recollecting those experiences and expressing the desire to be a part of the lost cultural past, gets continued in the poem “Southern Song”. The speaker now displaced from her southern land remembers the things she did when she was a part of it. The word ‘again’ gets repeated in the poem making it obvious the poem is a retelling of the activities of the past. The speaker wants to get involved with the daily activities of the Southern life. She wants to get drenched in the sun again. She wants to touch the “rain-soaked earth” and wants to smell the soil. The act of cultivating crops and clay baking are part of African American culture. The speaker reminisces about these activities that were a part of their culture and she wants to go back to it again. The speaker craves to go back and to be a part of all these activities. A glimpse of the brutality and savagery her people suffered at the hand of the Whites get delineated in the third stanza.

Recalling that she says, she doesn't want any sort of violence and carnage to displace her again from her Southern land. The last stanza is a warning from the speaker to the world, to the power that tries to dismantle her race. She asserts that no enemy can stand between her and her Southern land because it is the song of her body. No matter how hard the oppressor tries the final laugh will be of the oppressed because he/she is one with her culture which the oppressor tries to erase from this world. This truth takes shape in Alexander's poem "Southern Song".

The patient waiting from the poet's side to go back to the cultural past gets implied in the geographical place 'South', to enjoy the freedom it had once offered. The speaker in the poem 'Southern Song' affirms the inevitable relation between the body and the nature. The African soul, body and nature are a continuum. Though eclipsed by slavery, it is a continuum that no one can break. Her poems delineate the special bond that women share with nature.

Writing is an act of resistance and the writer plays the role of a messiah to save himself/herself and the people. In the poem, "I Want to Write" Alexander reveals her intention to write about her people. Through the act of writing she wants to give life and music to her peoples' 'dreams' by putting down their souls into 'notes'. The misery and sadness of her people become the theme of her song. She wants to be everything for her people. She wants to be the saviour, she wants to be the custodian of their history and she wants to uplift them from their downtrodden condition to "a mirrored pool of brilliance in the dawn" (10). The speaker considers this act of uplifting the people, giving voice to the background faces as her moral obligation to her race. The ardent wish of the poet to write about her people, crippled and hampered by the colour of their skin is depicted in the poem "I Want to Write".

The poems "Sorrow Home" and "Southern Song" depict the poet's insatiable desire to go back to the past and enjoy the wilderness of the South. Written down in the history by the White dominated world, the poet wants to give voice to her people and the poem "I Want to Write" deals with it. She, through the act of writing, helps her race to reconstruct the once lost identity. The sense of freedom and identity drawn by revisiting the cultural past and tradition became the major themes in her poems.

The oppression faced by the African American women under patriarchy, White supremacy and Western notions of feminism gained a new dimension with the arrival of poets like Maya Angelou. The frankness with which she depicted the inner consciousness of the black woman has made the world to wonder at the rich tradition, legacy and the indomitable spirit of the black race. The woman speaker in Maya Angelou's poem is proud of her body and her sexuality. The spokeswoman of the entire African American women race, her poems especially "Still I Rise", "Phenomenal Woman" and "Men" depict the nuances attached to the female gender and trace the roots back to the history that has been erased.

A woman's unconquerable courage and spirit to celebrate herself and her race, to taunt the suppresser for his aimless motive to overpower her, and her race becomes the

subject of the poem "Still I Rise". It's a call for all the marginalized faces in the world to identify their strength to fight against all sorts of power hierarchies. The pride in her black identity and the unparadonable injustices the White dominated nation has done on her and her grandmothers and grandfathers culminates in a new sense of courage, courage to rise again from the ashes. The celebration of the individual self begins the moment one realises; he/she can't be subjugated and ostracized by any dominant forces. "Still I Rise" is an outcome of this revelation.

In the initial lines of the poem, the speaker recalls the oppressor's deliberate act to wipe off the African race and to brand it as a race without history. The speaker plays with the binary you-I. 'You', the hegemonic power that has been trying to suppress the powerless and in the 'I', contains not only the speaker but the entire race; "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, /Welling and swelling I bear in the tide" (33-34). The 'I' extends itself to the multitude devoid of a past and present trying to liberate themselves from all forms of suppression. It's the pain and agony of the past that gives the speaker courage to rise, to rise above all forms of powers that stifle her and her race.

Through the refrains 'Still I rise' and 'I rise', the poet promises to her race and humanity that the blacks cannot be erased from history. It is the violence filled cultural past and the ambiguous identity that the dominant culture has given them, pushes the black women to rise above the obstacles. The speaker becomes the voice and dream of her people; "I am the dream and the hope of the slave" (40). The African American woman's unbeatable spirit, indomitable courage, urge to survive and pride in one's identity makes her the phenomenal woman.

The assertion of the black identity and pride in one's body that was once the abode of colonial suppression and sexual violence become the core of the poem "Phenomenal Woman". The body, precisely the African Woman's body becomes the subject of the poem. The reader sees the speaker taking pride in her body that has been shamed by the Whites. Through the poem the speaker reconciles with her body- every bit of it. Again it's the refrain "I'm a woman/ Phenomenally./Phenomenal woman,/ That's me" (10-13) that asserts their identity. There is no negotiation; it is the pure acceptances of the identity as a black woman that make the difference. It is a continuation of the Harlem pride that we see in these poems.

In "Men" the speaker recalls her experience with men. Men become the powerful and the universal oppressor. As a teenager she used to stand near the window to see men passing by. This habit of the teenager turns into a traumatic experience when she chokes under his weight. The fragility and tenderness of the woman is crushed like a "raw egg" (17) by the strong physique of the man. The last phrase "may be" (39) used by the speaker reveals her dilemma. The inability to take a strong decision again shows the vulnerability of her race, especially of the Afro-American women. The inevitability of the hardships that one has to undergo because of the stigma attached to the skin and the helplessness attached with one's body and sex become the main concern in the poem. It is through the act of recalling, revisiting and retelling the poetess tries to reconstruct her identity.

Writing poetry is an act of reconciliation and a tool of resistance with the unresolved riddles, traumatic experiences of the past that defines your present existence and future. In the chosen texts, there is a look back into the cultural past that is filled with; on one side the antiquity and legacy of the African culture and on other side the violence and injustice faced under the White supremacy, which helps in reconstructing the identity. Undoubtedly, the select works of Margaret Walker and Maya Angelou depict the transition from common themes like the stigma attached to the skin colour, black self-assertion against the White supremacy and the legacy of the past to the identity reconstruction of the African American women by revisiting their cultural past. The reader witnesses a shift from topography to the body to the self. These women writers, born in different periods of the twentieth century united in their aim to celebrate their culture, their past, their present, their body, put forth a new message to the confused human race of this post-truth world- no matter how hard the powerful tries to control and dominate the less powerful “like dust” they “rise”.

Harlem Renaissance has left an indelible mark on African-American literature. A new spirit to celebrate the blackness of the black wrapped in an emancipated consciousness has helped the African-Americans to see themselves and the world in a better light. The unflinching courage to rise again starts to surface in the works produced by them. An inclination towards the past and the search for the roots to define one’s present identity are overt in the writings of the African-Americans. The testimony for this lies in the paper itself. Nevertheless, the lustre and glamour Harlem bought to the Black race is an old story. It is an arcadia the Blacks wish to go back and live.

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