

Maya Angelou, the Angel of Protest: A study of her select poems

¹Dr. K.Nagamani

ABSTRACT:

The present paper entitled, “Maya Angelou, the Angel of Protest: A Study of her select poems” tries to reiterate how Angelou had been a strong yet positive voice of the oppression experienced by the Blacks and in addition as the ‘other’. Maya Angelou’s poetry addresses the issues of social and political subjugation and the dominance of patriarchy dormant for centuries. The poems are the so far unspoken voices of the multitude, celebrating the sense of self-respect and beauty, specifically of the black woman and women in general. The poem ‘Phenomenal Woman’ is a canto of praise that of the inherent beauty in a woman, whereas ‘Still I Rise’ is the cry for liberation and an assertion of indomitable spirit of womanhood never to be bowed down by life’s odds and human’s follies. ‘I know why the Caged Bird Sings’ is an anthem of hope and optimism even in the midst of desperate confinement and oppression. Her poems resonate with positivity and hope and a liberating power.

Key Words: Racial subjugation, spirit of freedom, hope

I. Introduction:

In the words of Barack Obama, Maya Angelou is “A brilliant writer, a fierce friend and a truly phenomenal woman”. Angelou took it as her responsibility to remind us that we are all God’s children, that we all have something to offer. Her works are a strong defense of Black Culture. Her poems depict her triumph over formidable social obstacles and her struggle to achieve a sense of identity and self-acceptance. Noted for her dynamic prose style, poignant humour, illumination of African American history and consciousness, her works trace her psychological, spiritual and political odyssey as she emerged from a disturbing and oppressive childhood.

Victimized due to race and gender:

Victim of child molestation at her early age, by one of her mother’s friends, and the subsequent traumatic events that followed, she became almost a virtual mute for few years. Her maternal uncles murdered the man who spoiled her and this shock mutilated her internally and she kept herself unwilling to communicate to the external world. Literature was her only solace and the means of venting out her agony and the result was a remarkable addition to literature of powerful autobiographies, poems and memoirs.

¹Assistant Professor, English and other Foreign Languages, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Ramapuram, Chennai-89

The voice of the voiceless:

Throughout her writing, she has explored the concepts of personal identity and resilience through the multifaceted lens of race, sex, community and the collective past as she has experienced it. In all her poems, the message of survival and liberation form a consistent theme. She affirms candidly in one of her interviews saying, “All my work, my life, everything is about survival”. (Lev Grossman) Despite the inequities of her life, she provides a positive message of humanity and hope as reflected in her own words, “the honorary duty of a human being is to love”.

In her prologue to the book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she says, “If growing up is painful for the southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat”. As an African American, Angelou experienced firsthand racial prejudices and discrimination in Arkansas. Audre Lorde writes, “Women responding to racism means women responding to anger, - anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal”

Still I Rise:

“Still I Rise” is an empowering poem about the struggle to overcome prejudice and injustice. It is not just the representation of slavery of Africa. The poem appeals to the readers as the first hand documentation of an individual’s encounter with oppression and abuse and the evolution as that of the phoenix from the ashes. The poem is almost universal – in its strong voice to rise against oppression of any kind. It has a universal message, a clear and positive pulsating energy. The poem is like an anthem, a beacon of hope for the oppressed and downtrodden. In one of her interviews she spoke about the comforting impact of the poem. “You know, if you are lonely you feel you’ve been alone down, it is nice to have “And Still I Rise” (www.npr.org 2008 interview). It is an interrogation of scathing inquiry towards the oppressor.

Throughout the poem, the types of harrowing and unjust treatment that black people undergo in America are addressed. She uses call and response technique. You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure. (Maya Angelou: A hymn to Human Endeavour- Lev Gross man, May 28,2014). The poem demonstrates a strong determination to be strong, to overcome oppression with self-esteem.

I am the dream and the hope of the slave
I rise
I rise
I rise (40-43)

Whatever the aggression may be, it comes to no avail, for the oppressed will still rise, like air, an element which you cannot shoot, cut, or kill.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I'll rise.(21-24)

There is a surprising note of determination and will not to succumb to aggression of any kind. Like a phoenix that rises from its ashes, a determined woman is sure to rise up against all odds with strengthened audacity.

Phenomenal Woman:

The poem "Phenomenal Woman" is another signatory embodiment of Maya Angelou's conviction wherein we find her phenomenal definition of beauty. The poem answers the question, "What makes a woman phenomenal? And the answer is in concluding lines

'cause I am a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal Woman

That's me.(57-60)

According to Angelou, an upright woman is phenomenal, the undauntedness- the head that's "not bowed" down by so-called oppressions of patriarchal society makes her unique. Every woman is unfathomable mystery and no man can predict it and this unpredictable nature is her predominant strength.

"Men themselves have wondered

What they see in me

They try so much

But they can't touch

My inner mystery"(30-34)

Even if a woman is open and transparent, men can never really succeed in reading a woman; they can never understand her. Like the iceberg whose tip is just visible superficially, what the woman projects outside is just a speck of her innermost self. The pride of being a woman makes her phenomenal. The phenomenal woman is a mystery not only to men but also to her own gender. Pretty women wonder about the secrets of the phenomenal woman's beauty. But beauty is not in maintaining zero size befitting a glam model. Hyperbole is a technique that predominates Angelou's poetry. It is strongly employed in the poem "Phenomenal Woman". Men really fall headlong for such a phenomenal woman. They lose themselves and begin to adore her.

I walk into a room

Just as cool as you please,

And to a man,

The fellows stand or

Fall down on their knees.

Then they swarm around me,

A hive of honey bees.(14-20)

She enumerates her characteristics that make her a phenomenal woman, in contradiction with the pretty women of the modern times who think that beauty lies in blemishless skin, its bright white tone enhanced by the painted beauty techniques. But in truth, it is the integrity in one's own personality that makes a person attractive.

It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.(22-27)

I Know why the Caged Bird Sings:

The poem was published as a part of her debut memoir of the same name in 1983; as the voice of African-American resilience and dignity. Written at the suggestion or encouragement whatsoever it may be called, by James Baldwin, the book became a poignant record of her childhood and youth and received international acclaim as the first of its kind from an African American woman.

Alone:

"Alone" is a poem published in 1975, which ironically stresses the importance of being in a society; the poem is like a monologue, a thinking aloud sort, expressing the impossibility of being alone in a more sober and pensive mood.

Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody
Nobody
Can make it out here. (4-10)

Wealth alone cannot bring spiritual well being and happiness. Having too much money brings isolation. Angelou uses biblical reference to drive home the significance of spiritual nourishment to the soul. "Everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again but whoever drinks the water I give them will thirst."(John 4:14)

"If you are the son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread"(Matthew 4:3)

Now if you listen closely

I'll tell you what I know

Storm clouds are gathering

The wind is gonna blow

The race of man is suffering(24-28)

There is a kind of apocalyptic feel to the lines as if something dreadful is going to happen. Human souls have to work together for the common good of all.

Angleou's Feminism:

Angelou is one of the elite passionate feminists of society. By revealing the bitter past experiences of her life, she sets the stage for the new generation of black women writers. Her memoirs paved the way to women empowerment. We have voices which need to be heard. She taught us to embrace our womanliness. We are all phenomenal women. "I am a feminist. I've been a female for a long time now. I'd be stupid not to be on my own side." Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently. (Maya Angelou: the Inspirational Feminist- respctwomen.co.in 10 June 2014)

Angelou- the Angel of Positivity:

In spite of all the bitterness she had endured throughout, there is always a note of positivity in all her writings as goes the lines in her poem, "Still I Rise"

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I'll rise.(5-8)

Maya Angelou's words of appreciation for Mrs. Clinton are true of any struggling woman in an endeavour to define herself. "Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women."(Juston Jones, NY Times)

Repetition is a powerful technique frequently used by Angelou. To reinstate the idea of freedom, Maya Angelou uses repetition as a powerful poetic tool. Sometimes the lines are repeated and at times, entire stanza is repeated as in “caged bird”. Bird is used as a metaphor to reinforce the idea of freedom.

“His wings are clipped and his feet are tied

So he opens his throat to sing”(29-30)

The free bird on the other hand names the sky his own. The caged bird “stands on the grave of dreams”(27). Angelou’s optimistic touch comes to play here. Though the bird is caged and wings are clipped, it has not lost its freedom of expression-his right to sing. The poet suggests that even though freedom is lost, it doesn’t mean the end of all. There is the right to voice forth protest.

II. Conclusion:

Maya Angelou’s poems portray the subjugated voice of the Black woman in particular and the women in general, bearing universal semblance. The picture of the “Phenomenal Woman” she gives is reminiscent of Tamil poet Bharthiyar’s dream of an ideal undaunted woman with head held high and eyes straight and such women will definitely be phenomenal and would make a difference whatsoever.

References:-

1. Angelou, Maya. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, 1994.
2. Angelou, Maya. “When it Comes to Politics, Friendship has its Limits”. Interview by Juston Jones. *New York Times*. Jul. 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/23/us/politics/23oprah.html>
3. Grossman, Lev. “Maya Angelou: A hymn to Human Endurance”, *TIME*. May 28, 2014
4. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/statement-president-passing-maya-angelou>
5. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>
6. <https://biblehub.com>matthew>
7. <https://biblehub.com>john>