

Women, Cage and Freedom: A Thematic Study of Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

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Abstract

Feminism is a fairly complex term to be defined and explained, it has a diverse range of movements aiming to restructure the existing patterns of the patriarchal society. Within feminism there exists criticism, the biased representation of the black women by the white feminists needs a critique. The western feminists overlook the experiences and the struggles of the black women as non-existent and unworthy of mention. Black women suffer twice, one at the hands of patriarchy and second, oppression from white feminists. Many African-American writers focus on the experiences of the black women and make an attempt to destabilize the identity handed over to them by the elite feminists and white women writers. The focus of these writers is to define themselves to the world according to their own real experiences and not as depicted by the others. Being women of black colour they fight a dual battle, breaking the hegemonic structures built around them and reconstructing their identity as black women. Maya Angelou, is one of the few writers fighting for their representation and narrating the real struggles and oppressions faced by their community. The silenced experiences are given voice by their works and they assert their identity through them. This paper would focus on selected poems of Maya Angelou and bring out the feminist themes of women's identity in general and the discrimination faced by them. The paper would also include references of feminist poems from other poets mentioning issues of racism and discrimination of women and draw a comparison with the poems of Maya Angelou.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Black feminism, African-American women

“History cannot do without the existence of two human subjects, man and woman, if it is to get away from master–slave relationships.”

(Irigaray,62)

Feminism is a diverse term to be defined and explained, it has a range of movements aiming to restructure the existing patterns of the patriarchal society. All the political and social feminist movements have one common goal, i.e equality of women. Feminism is a fight against discrimination and injustice to women based on gender. Bell Hooks defines Feminism in *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* as, “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”.(8) The movement focuses on the difference between sex and gender and attempts to break the essentials attached to it. Gender, a social attribute makes women the weaker sex, assigns her the domestic chores, deprives her participation in other spheres of life etc. Feminists break away from the stereotypes created by the society with the motive to redefine the roles of women. They believe that women has always been regarded as inferior to men, and the subordinate position has been deliberately created. Feminists work

tirelessly for the emancipation of women's rights in all the fields and to be treated as equals and not as the 'other' sex. To call women docile, homemakers, caregivers, mothers, dutiful-wives is hegemonic way of addressing them as subordinates. This is a way of silent oppression practiced on women in our society. Many female writers have taken up this issue of biased representations in literature and other fields, thus, they take up writing to clear their distorted images of women characters. Writing becomes a tool to unleash their agony and pain for the domination they have suffered over the years. Thus feminism has plethora of issues concerning women and this paper focuses on how Maya Angelou is a feminist writer and how she develops the themes around feminist issues. She presents the spirit of a caged woman as undying, and how the twisted lies cannot break her, and how phenomenal woman is in herself.

Maya Angelou, a notable African-American poet of the twentieth century, highlight the plight of women especially black women in her poems and is known for remarkably publicizing her personal life. She fights for their identity and asserts their existence in the world of male dominated and white feminist writers. She makes an earnest attempt to break down the stereotypes built around women by the male ideology in the society. Further lending voice to the sufferings of black women, which are totally non-existent in the mainstream culture. She shatters the barriers created by the patriarchy for women and focus on defining their identity. Her famous poems are drawn from her personal experiences and struggles, charting down her journey as a woman. "the reasons of using feminism perspective by the poet is the image of her bad life experiences"(Permatasari 152) This paper would study, 'Phenomenal Woman', 'Still I Rise', 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' as feminist poems and trace the development of thought she draws for women in its themes. "the dominant type of feminism in Maya Angelou's poem is Radical Feminism because discrimination toward black women are related to the bad history of black people."(Permatasari 152) Maya Angelou is a very convincing voice to talk about racial equality, femininity and gender. She, herself a black writer advocated for black women's rights who were under oppression of the white feminist thought. From years men have created a negative ideology for women and their roles in the society, the representation of their experiences were biased and distorted. Then women took control of their identity and started writing their own works, Elaine Showalter gave the concept of Gynocriticism, it focuses on women's writing about women's experiences. In her seminal essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" proposed for women to start writing and to be different from the kind of writing that has been written. This is apt to say that Maya Angelou takes the reins of her identity and defines it through her poems.

The problem arises when the women universalize the struggles of women everywhere as similar. Black feminist thought fights this discrimination of not recognizing their unique experiences faced on the basis of colour. In general feminism fights for equality of women and restructuring the society. The fight is to breakdown the stereotypes created around women as caregivers, nurturers, mothers and their roles being limited to domestic chores. They reject the societal roles assigned on the basis of gender one is born into, rather they believe women also perform their duties outside homes. Men assigned these roles to women, to remain the superior sex and enjoy freedom that was not assigned to women. It is then women resort to writing to express their painful existence in comparison to the man. Many of her poems reflect the powerful identity and persona of a woman, especially as a black woman. She writes with this thought to raise the status of women in society and especially the

marginalized black women. Patricia Collins writes in her article “Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology”, “The suppression of Black women’s efforts for self-definition in traditional sites of knowledge production has led African-American women to use alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for articulating the core themes of Black feminist consciousness”(198)

Maya Angelou represents the entire African-American women community, and exposes their plight in a new culture and their struggles for existence and identity. Women have always been overshadowed by negative stereotypes and to fight back is not an easy task. The existing image of a black woman is that of downtrodden and marginalized devoid of any progress and fulfillment. The oppression women face at the hands of patriarchy is one issue and the oppression faced by black women at the hands of male and white ideology is the second issue. Margaret Atwood in her poem, ‘This is a Photograph of me’ concerns herself with the position of women in the male dominated society. She being a Canadian writer highlights the fact, irrespective of country and location women are subjugated to dominance and control. Their existence is marginalized and they are living as a subaltern. She asserts through her poem, that no matter what the hegemonic structures of a male dominated culture are, it cannot eradicate her existence. Their experiences would always live alongside men, even if they do not want to acknowledge the existence as equals. The society suppresses their voices, but it cannot make them disappear forever. They might not be visible as much as their counterparts, but they cannot ignore their presence. Atwood, presents a photograph to the readers and teaches them how to interpret that picture. She feels that picture is the history of women, she has drowned in the lake shown in the picture, she is not visible but definitely exists. That is an interpretation of how women have been written down in history, but that does not mean they have ceased to exist. The problem of writing history by men is lack of accuracy and precision. Many experiences get deleted in the process of focusing on the experiences of men. Photograph has blurred lines and is not a very clear picture, hence giving a view of unclear history. Even if she does some notable work in the society, it is hidden, shadowed or blurred. Men fail to recognize the efforts put in by a woman. With the symbols of trees, branches and lake she breaks down the layers of patriarchy and remarks that women cannot be completely negated by men. She has and would always exist, by keeping time unclear in the picture, she stresses on the oppression of women that cannot be measured in time, it has always existed.

Maya Angelou takes a similar stand for women and voices their experiences of discrimination. Patricia Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, gives three dimensions to view the politics involved behind the suppression of black feminist thought. (i) the exploitation of Black women’s labor essential to U.S capitalism, leading to economic oppression (ii) the political dimension of oppression has denied African-American women the rights and privileges (iii) controlling images applied to Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of U.S.(4,5) Through Angelou’s poems the paper discusses these dimensions and other issues related to women with a special focus on women of colour. In ‘Still I Rise’, the poet highlights how misconceptions about black women have made their ideologies, concerning economic oppression. Black women have had to do menial labour jobs, they were denied high paying and white collar employment. Angelou remarks that inspite of all these odds, these women have the courage to come out as survivors and then she questions if that is what upsets the men in the society.

'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room. (Still I Rise 56)

And in "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" wants to draw a picture of a woman who despite her obstacles fight and rise. The male ideology has built notions of disgust and hate for them, they are shown to be belonging to dirt and filth "Traditionally, many U.S. White feminist scholars have resisted having Black women as full colleagues"(Collins 5) and further Collins write "One pattern of suppression is that of omission."(5) and this is what Angelou highlights, that by writing them down from history they are attaining a superior position.

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.(Still I Rise 56)

These lines also depict how the image of black women is built on fabricated lies and false assumptions. These women live in the poorest conditions and is difficult to face the white domination. White signifies elite and superiority and black is everything opposite of the white. They have created these binaries to portray themselves opposite of the black, and everything that is not bad is white. "you may tread in the very dirt" is perfect to represent where these black women are kept by the white culture, they do not want them to ever rise, but black women asserts that no matter what they have to face they won't be oppressed for long, they would still rise. The black woman asserts her identity irrespective of the oppression she bears, be it inside homes or outside home.

'Still I Rise' is a very powerful poem sending a message of hope for the dominated and downtrodden. The poem strongly condemns prejudice and injustice meted out to the less privileged section of the society. It expresses her own struggles while she faced racism for being black. This poem symbolizes the defiant spirit of each woman who ever faced oppression because of her colour, it is not only a story of the poet, but of each black woman. On the other hand poem also signifies a general behavior of the society towards women. And because of the fierce attitude of women they still overcome these obstacles and create a space for themselves. Maya Angelou lays emphasis on the condition of black women in America, and how they come out as survivors in spite of their conditions. In 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' she stresses on how women are like the caged birds, dreaming to be free and to be able to control their lives. The societal codes benefit the men, who dream and achieve their goals, but for women there are boundaries and limitations at every step. The opportunities available to men are more than available to women, she criticizes the dominant male thought process of assuming a superior status to themselves and presuming women to be the weaker sex. This is the second dimension of Collins view about black feminist thought. The denial of equal rights to women in USA is a method of omitting them from history. It further dissects into elite white thought and black feminist thought, the black women are marginalized by the white women." Denying African-American women the credentials to become literate certainly excluded most African-American women from positions as scholars, teachers, authors, poets, and critics.(Collins 5) There exists a superiority in the western feminism that works against the interests of black women. Thus, they feel caged and sing louder to be heard.

In the 'Phenomenal Woman', Angelou celebrates being a woman, she is powerful and intrigues curiosity in men. She expresses her joy of being a woman and celebrates her gender. Through these poems we can see a development of thought, in 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' she expresses pain of being subjugated, but a still a flicker of hope sustains her, then in 'Still I Rise', the thought is of overcoming the obstacles and in the 'Phenomenal Woman', she celebrates the essence of being a woman, true fighter and a survivor. Truly Angelou is a celebrated feminist writer, depicting all shades of women in her poems.

Patricia Collins believes, "Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our objectification as the Other denies us the protections that white skin maleness and wealth confer"(201) Sandra. This standpoint allows Maya Angelou to show women their integrity and strength lies within and they cannot take chances with it, rather use it constructively to cast a permanent shadow over oppression and dominance. Black women cannot afford to act foolish but need to utilize their capacities, obviously the opportunities and choices are less as compared to their white skin counterparts.

"A free bird leaps on the back
Of the wind and floats downstream"(caged birds,13)

The white women are free birds with choice of freedom but the black African-American are the caged birds, only dreaming of freedom

"The caged bird sings of freedom.(caged birds, 23)

They are tied in boundaries and racism. No matter how hard they try to come out of it, they are not heard.

"Can seldom see through his bars of rage"(caged birds,23)

Angelou urges them to look beyond this rage burning within and use it constructively to make their presence felt. There is frustration and anger for the treatment given to them. As Patricia Collins says they cannot make fools of them, but letting that rage work against them would be acting carelessly.

" In 'Phenomenal Woman' she comments that women has everything to own the world and make men wonder for the mysteries that lies within us.

"It's the fire in my eyes,
My inner mystery"(45)

She further elaborates
"I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.
Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed" (45)

It is a message to everyone that her head would never bow. She comes out victorious when she questions the society about her existence. The way she has been created is

immensely phenomenal and her strengths within do not let her head bow down to oppression, domination and control.

“Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.”(Still I Rise 56)

This is what everybody expected her but she chose to rise against all odds. She challenges the negative stereotypes, and dominant cultural trends. And warns them that they might want to delete her from history but she won't be written off, she confronts the barriers and shows them it is not easy to kill her from history

“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.”(Still I Rise 56)

The poet describes the pain and trauma of the community women, they are treated with disgust and hatred. This reflects the treatment meted out to them by the white hegemonic culture. Further the right to dream, happiness, equal opportunities is taken away from them, they are deprived of their basic rights to live happily

“The free bird thinks of another breeze
And the trade winds soft through
The sighing trees”(caged bird,23)
Describes situation of white women but black women have to kill their hopes and dreams,

“But a caged BIRD stands on the grave of dreams
His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied”(caged bird, 23)

Maya Angelou kindles hopes and desires through her poems. She is a beacon of hope and light in an alley of darkness. She empowers other women to fight back and resist the dominance at each step. In “Still I Rise” she writes a message for the world, the patriarchy and the white feminists.

“I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise (57)

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