

Rising from the Dust: A Study of Maya Angelou's Poetry

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Abstract

The true African-American Renaissance occurred during the last quarter of the twentieth century with the rise of subaltern theory and post-colonial theory. The impact of African American artistic production on American and world culture is significant in the fields of films, television, theatre, music, painting and literature. The galaxy of great African American women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Rita Dove and many more have challenged the Euro centric, white dominant canon by creating their own tradition of literary writing. Toni Morrison became the first African-American Nobel laureate in literature in 1983; Alice Walker's theory of womanism has created a space for other oppressed communities across the globe. The institutionalization of African-American literature as subject of academic inquiry ensured that these writers and their readers were keenly aware of the tradition in which they worked. African American women's writing is based on their suffering due to their class, race and gender. Though not admitted in libraries or schools, they expressed themselves in a media allowed to them: cooking, gardening, story-telling and quilting. Contemporary African American women writers revised therefore mother's stories in their writing to challenge the patriarchal structure and thus decenter the center.

The present paper is an attempt to study Maya Angelou's poetry which received less critical attention than her autobiographies. The career of Maya Angelou is a testament both to her vitality and power to endure. She has expressed her talents as dancer, singer, producer, composer, journalist, actor, teacher as well as writer. Chosen by President Bill Clinton to read at his inauguration on Jan, 21 1993 Angelou was both the first woman poet to be so honoured. Her poetry addresses social and political issues involving African American and challenges the validity of traditional American values and myths. She also describes African-American women's experiences and protest against the gender codes of American society by celebrating African-American women's self-respect. The tone of her poetry is optimistic, and confident. Through her writing she spreads the message of love, hope, sisterhood and peace across the globe by singing, "I am the dream and the hope of slave. I rise".

Keywords: African-American women's writing, class, race and gender, optimistic, and confident tone

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.
Maya Angelou.

The true African American Renaissance occurred during the last quarter of the twentieth century with the rise of African American women's writing. The emergence of "the community of black women's writing" is one of the hallmarks of the contemporary period. The impact of African American artistic production on American and World culture is significant in the fields of films, television, theatre, music, painting and literature. The galaxy of great African American women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Rita Dove and many more have challenged the Eurocentric white dominant canon by creating their own tradition of literary writing. Toni Morrison became the first African American Nobel Laureate in literature in 1993. Alice Walker's theory of womanism has created a space for other oppressed communities across the globe. African American women's writing is an inscription of pain and suffering since its inception. Contemporary African American women writers revised their foremother's legacy in their writing to challenge the patriarchal structure. As Paul Marshall observes:

The group of women around the table taught me my first lesson in narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work is attributed to them. It stands as testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the word shop of the kitchen.

Marshall. 2168.

African American women writers write mainly about Black people, Black experiences and Black life. Their writing mainly focuses on sexual equality in the Black community and with the world power structure that subjugates both the blacks and women. Its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing.

This paper is an attempt to study Maya Angelou's poetry which received less critical attention than her autobiographies. The career of Maya Angelou is a testament both to her vitality and power to endure. She has expressed her talents as dancer, singer, producer, composer, journalist, actor, teacher as well as writer. Chosen by President Bill Clinton to read at his inauguration on January 21, 1993, Angelou was both the first African-American and the first woman poet to be so honoured. Reviewer Elsie B Washington has called her "the black women's poet laureate" and has called Angelou's poetry "the anthems of African American". Angelou's biographers have stated that Angelou's poems "reflect the richness and subtlety of Black speech and sensibilities" and were meant to be read

aloud. The purpose of her writing is, “to be representative rather individual authoritative rather than confessional.” She has published several volumes of poetry which include *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water Before I Die* (1971); *Oh, Pray My Wings are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975); *Still I Rise* (1978); *Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?* (1983); *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987); *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990); and her celebrated poem *On the Pulse of the Morning* (1993). Her poetry addresses social and political issues involving African American and challenges the validity of traditional American values and myths. She also describes African-American women’s experiences and protest against the gender codes of American society by celebrating African American women’s self-respect. Despite the difficulties of her early life, Angelou’s poetry is full of references to positive life affirming values, particularly courage of the African American community in which she grew up. She has, “strength in the face of adversity”. The use of concrete imagery and abstract symbolism through which to render both the sexual and emotional experience is characteristic of Angelou’s poetic persona.

In many of her protest poems Angelou expressed the sickness of racism. In “When I Think About Myself”, the speaker cries out against a system that supports the economic oppression of blacks by white. The persona is a sixty year old poor black woman who works as a maid for a very young white woman addresses her as “girl”. As a defence mechanism to dismiss her suffering, she ironically laughs at herself. As she says:
When I think about myself

I almost laugh myself to death.
My life has been one big joke.
A dance that’s walked
A song that is spoke,
I laugh so hard I almost choke
When I think about myself
Maya. 34

In the third stanza the movement shifts to her folks - African Americans. At the thought of their helpless status the persona of the poem dies of laughing. The speaker’s personal lament expands into a song of general protest. The ‘I’ of the poem expresses the pain of the entire community. As Stephen Henderson observes, “the ‘I’ of Black poetry is not a singular or individualistic referent but a symbol for the ideas of Black collective.” (Stephen, 35)

The first two volumes of Angelou’s poetry mainly discuss the problems of Black people, but her third volume of poetry, *And Still I Rise* contains a hopeful determination to rise above discouraging defeat. These poems are inspired and spoken by a confident voice of strength that recognizes its own power. The volume apart from discussing familiar themes of love and its inevitable loneliness, discusses the issues such as sexual awakening, drug addiction and Christian salvation.

One of the best poems in this volume is “Phenomenal Woman”, which captures the essence of womanhood and at the same time describes the many talents of the poet herself. The poem is a hymn to woman’s beauty. The self-confident speaker reveals her attributes as a phenomenal woman. Unlike the fashion magazines’ beauties, she exults in being different.

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies
I ‘m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size.
The speaker though not beautiful as a model, describes her strength. As she says:

It’s in the reach of my arms
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I ‘m a woman
Phenomenally
Phenomenal woman
That’s me.
Angelou. 14

The poem is a tribute to the strength and vitality of African American women. As Yasmin Deguot observes: By centring her speaker in a woman-centred space, Angelou challenges the male centred and militaristic messages of the Black Art Movement

Yasmin. 124
Similar to “Phenomenal Woman” in its economical form and forceful rhythm is “Woman Work”. The two poems also bear a thematic resemblance in their praise of woman’s vitality. The poem describes the endless cycle of chores in a woman’s typical day.

I’ve got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
Then baby to dry
Angelou. 35

For her there is no other source of solace and consolation than nature and its powerful elements. As she says:

Sun, rain curving sky
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow
You are all that I can call my own.
Angelou. 35

The title poem “Still, I Rise” refers to “the indomitable spirit of the black people.” In spite of adversity, dire conditions and circumstances in site of racial epithets and hostility, Angelou expresses unshakable faith that one will overcome, one will triumph; one will rise. The poem begins energetically, speaking to an unnamed person:

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.

In the last stanza of the poem, she describes her response to the past:

Out of the huts of history’s sham
I rise.
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise.
Angelou. 23

The poem is a beautiful illustration of Angelou's strength and courage amidst the difficulties of life. The hope for a better tomorrow is the central theme of "Still I Rise". The same spirit and hope is expressed in Angelou's poem "Life Does not Frighten Me". She in a very self assertive tone proclaims that she is not afraid of terrors of life. She accepts the realities of life and celebrates joys and sorrows of life equally. As she says:

I go boo
Make them shoo
I make fun
Way then run
I won't cry
So they fly
I just smile
They go wild
Life does not frighten me at all.
Angelou. 162

Many of Angelou's poems deal with love, its joy and its inevitable sorrow. In the poem "To a Husband" the man is shown as a symbol of African strength and beauty. As she says:

You're Africa to me
At brightest dawn
The congo's green and
Copper's blackish hue
A continent to build
With Black Man's drawn
I sit at home and see it all
Through you.
Angelou. 27

As her poem "Phenomenal Woman" is a tribute to the vitality of African American women, this poem is a tribute to the strengths of African American man.

"A Plagued Journey" depicts the socio-political struggles that allow liberation of the human spirit. The poems like "When You Come to Me" expresses the sorrowful memory of lost love, the experience of rape expressed in "Men", the horror of child abuse expressed in "To Beat the Child Was Bad Enough." This group of poems describe the personal experiences of poetic persona, but creates the community of listeners who share in the pain or trauma of speaker. These poems offer healing to readers who share similar stories. Her poetry as Yasmin observes, "has capacity to heal, liberate and empower her readers." Yasmin. 128.

Angelou's humanistic approach beautifully reflects in her most significant and critically acclaimed poem "On the Pulse of Morning". The poem begins with "A Rock, a River, a Tree" and calls for peace, racial and religious harmony and social justice for people of different origins, incomes, genders and sexual orientations. As the poet says:

Come clad in peace and I will sing the songs-
The Creator gave to me when I
And the tree and stone were one
Before cynicism was as bloody sea across your brow
And when you yet knew you still knew nothing
The river sings and sings on
There is a true yearning to respond to

The singing river and the wise rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew
The African and Native American, the stou
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,
The Irish, the Rabbi, the priest, the sheikh
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher
The Privileged, the homeless, the teacher
They hear. They all hear.
The speaking of the tree
Today, the first and last of every tree
Speaks to humankind. Come to me, here beside the
river
Plant yourself beside me, here beside the river.
Angelou. 27

The poem recalls the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther Jr.'s famous speech which says:

I have a dream, a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.
One day this nation will rise up and live to its creed. We hold
these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.
Martin Luther King Jr. 1986

Angelou requests all Americans to work together for the progress of humanity. The poem ends with a hope and new awakening for America:
Here on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage
To look up and out upon me,
The rock, the river, the tree, your country.
No less to Midas than the mendicant
No less to you now than the mastodon then
Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes,
Into your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope
Good morning.
Angelou. 28-29

Maya Angelou's poetry expresses the dream and hope, desires and aspirations, joys and sorrows of African Americans. As Carol E. Neubauer observes, "Maya Angelou reaches out to touch the lives of others and to offer them hope and confidence in place of humiliation and despair through all her verse." (Carol. 313) Through her poetry she spreads the message of love, hope, sisterhood and peace across the globe by singing:

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a day break that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise.
I rise.
I rise.
I rise.
Angelou. 23

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