

Maya Angelou: A Soul Drenched in Protest

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Abstract: This research paper attempts to study the poetry of Maya Angelou and analyzes how the poet voiced the horrors of racial oppression faced by thousands of African Americans. This paper also mirrors the barbaric face of the society which discriminates amongst people on the basis of their skin color and snatches away their basic right to live as well as express their ideas and opinions in general. Early in her life Angelou realized the true power of words and decided to make poetry as her most efficient weapon against racial discrimination witnessed by her. With an attitude to rebel against the cruel discrimination of color, she woke up to a morning which gave back her lost identity and voice. This led to the publication of the autobiography titled 'I know why the caged bird sings' which got much deserved critical acclaim. She became the first African American woman to confidently voice about her personal life in public.

Keywords: African American, Racism, Oppression, Liberty, Individuality, Protest, Poetry as Weapon, Soul.

Much has been written and talked about the extreme discrimination faced by Blacks due to their color. History has been a witness to the transportation of millions of Black slaves to European lands and the brutal conditions in which they were forced to live. They were beaten, chained, forced to all kinds of labor, raped and killed because of their color.

Every Black has fought the battle against racial harassment but each has different story to narrate. The difference lies in their way of protest. They wanted to point out the inequalities among races and socio economic groups as well as to encourage the transformation in the society that engenders such inequalities. The reason why a poet or a novelist has to speak in a subterfuge to get to the injustices in society is because influential people don't want any unrest in society. An open protest would be anarchy. Therefore it's on the shoulders of artists to reveal the soot underneath the society.

Poetry became a crucial weapon for the Blacks to fight racism around the 1920s after the Great Migration. More than six million African Americans migrated to the North and a sense of independence grew among them. What followed this was the idea of voicing their opinions through writing against the oppression they had faced and therefore many writers became a part of Harlem Renaissance. The writers pushed for an end to segregation, confronted the issue of racism and helped shape a sense of pride and independence in the African American community.

This sense of pride continued into 1970s and their writings became a part of mainstream literature. Their work was recognized through many awards, achievements and bestselling novels. Though they addressed the same societal concerns, they were still continued to be considered as the 'other'. This can be seen in one of the poems of Maya Angelou 'I know why the caged bird sings'. The poet uses the metaphor of 'caged bird' who can only sing in order to bring about a change in its situation. The following lines are from the poem:-

**'his wings are clipped
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.'**

These lines represent the idea that the reason why the slaves had the only source of writing through which they could voice their views against the hardships they had faced.

Maya Angelou had herself witnessed the horrors of racial discrimination and hardships of a poverty stricken in her early years. She couldn't reply back to the ill-treatment by a few white girls, she couldn't watch a movie in the white movie house, she was rejected to be treated by a white dentist who remarked, "**my policy is that I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's.**" and to top it all she was raped by her mother's boyfriend at the tender age of eight.

The incident left an indelible mark on her personality. She lost her identity as well as her voice. This has been shown in one of her poems 'Still I Rise' which is majorly influenced her personal life. The following lines show her pain and helplessness which she felt during the injustices done to her:-

**“Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling like teardrops
Weakened by my soulful cries”**

These lines convey the idea of oppression. The oppressors want the victim to give up his struggle and accept the injustice being done to him.

The rape incident rendered Maya mute for five years. She refused to speak to anyone until she met Mrs. Flowers who left a beautiful impact on her life. Not only did Maya speak but she started loving her life. She told Maya that 'language is a man's way of communicating with his fellow men and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals...it takes a human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.'

That is when Angelou realized the true power of words and decided to make poetry as her most efficient weapon against racial discrimination witnessed by her. With an attitude to fight back and rebel against the cruel discrimination of color, she woke up to a morning which gave back her lost identity and voice. This led to the publication of the autobiography-Caged Bird which got much deserved critical acclaim. She became the first African American woman who was able to talk about her personal life in public.

Her poems carry an element of resistance to emotional and physical oppression and a will to discover the path of survival. Her poem 'Still I Rise' is the perfect example to her strong attitude towards life. The following lines from the poem exhibit her confidence and her assertion to be treated as an equal being:-

**“Cause I walk like I've got gold wells;
Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines”**

The poet says that her life is very precious. She asserts her strength, power and richness of her character as one who owns gold and oil (the most expensive of resources).

Maya Angelou is not the only black writer, who voiced her opinion against racial discrimination. Many black writers came forward to express their views against this issue and made poetry their weapon to deal with it. A prominent name in the field of poetry is Langston Hughes. He attempted to break the social conformity of blacks in America by speaking against racial discrimination and other obstacles the African Americans faced due to socio political climate of the country. He used his poetry to convey the idea that 'there is no lack within the negro people of beauty, strength and power.' His poem 'As I grew older' shows the dream of a Black person and how it is shattered through the wall of racial discrimination. However, this doesn't lower his confidence and again he sees dreams of a non-racist America. This can be understood through the following lines:-

**“Break through the wall!
Find my dream!
Help me shatter this darkness
To break this shadow
Into a thousand whirling dreams!”**

The poet has decided to fight against the discrimination; he has the strength to come forward to initiate the act of change. Maya Angelou has always received mixed reactions from her critics. Though she has published several volumes of poetry, critics have always preferred to call her an auto biographer since her writings are mostly influenced by her personal life.

Her poems are considered by some critics to be thin in substance and lacking in poetic invention. Scholar Zafia Burr has connected Angelou's failure to impress professional critics to both the public nature of her poems and to critics' preference for poetry as a written form rather than a verbal one. However, her biographers have stated that Angelou's poem reflect the richness and subtlety of black sensibilities and are meant to be read aloud. A critic Lyman B. Hagen one said about her poetry,

“Angelou may rank as a poet of moderate ability but her poetry is praised for its honesty and for moving a sense of dignity”.

Maya Angelou uses such symbols and metaphors which make her stand high in comparison to other black poets. In her poem ‘Still I Rise’ she compares herself with a leaping Black Ocean. It swallows in itself all kinds of hardships, oppression and injustice faced by the poet and throws back a strong person who can resist this discrimination. Repetition is a powerful tool through which she emphasizes her message that she wants to give in her poems. Usage of the phrase ‘I rise’ again and again signifies that however harsh may be the circumstances, the poet will still stand again to face the world boldly rather than crying on her fate.

Another popular name which comes to one’s mind is Anne Spencer, an African American poet whose commitment to human equality led to her fame. Though many of her poems did not get publish, she continued to express her feelings towards the treatment of blacks by the whites. She emphasizes the human rule over God’s rule on the Earth. In her poem ‘White things’, she describes the inhumane treatment of Black people at the hands of whites. Through color imagery she tries to convey the idea that most of the things in this world are colored but still there is a prejudice against colored people. She has shown by subjugating a person on the basis of color humans defy the God itself. The following lines are from the poem ‘White Things’:-

**“They pyred a race of black,
And burned them to ashes white;
then laughing, a young one claimed a skull,
for the skull of a black is white, not dull ”**

The poet wants to reinstate the idea that a black is as intelligent and bright as a white. Just a mere color cannot stereotype intelligence to be a white person’s commodity.

Just like Spencer Maya Angelou in her poem ‘**Touched by An Angel**’ talks about the idea of acceptance through the metaphor of love. Since love has the power to break all the boundaries and spread equality among the races. The following lines convey the whole idea:

**“Until love leaves its holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life”**

Toni Morrison is yet another black women writer whose works deals with the theme of racism. She believed in the idea ‘**You have to confront your oppressor**’ but at the same time she did not want to write her stories from somebody else’s point of view. Therefore her novel, ‘The Bluest Eye’ questions the white notions of beauty with a historical background. Claudia MacTeer, one of the main characters in the novel is a little black girl who rejects the white doll given to her as Christmas present and dissects it only to find it ‘hollow’. Claudia is a fighter, when sees the Pecola is harassed by a group of boys, she immediately turns to her rescue and when she learns that Pecola is pregnant, she and her sister come up with a plan to save Pecola’s baby from the community’s rejection. Treading on the same path is Maya Angelou’s poem ‘The Lesson’. This poem too deals with racial discrimination with an open protest. It vividly describes the idea of being alive through the metaphor of death. She has compared her pain with the opening fists of an infant which symbolizes that just like Pecola the speaker to has experienced pain early in her life which led to the loss of her childhood.

**‘Memory of old tombs,
Rotting flesh and worms
do not convince me against the challenge’**

These lines show her aggressive attitude towards the wrongs she is subjected to and her never say die faith in life is commendable.

Last in this row of poems is Maya Angelou’s poem ‘**A Conceit**’. This poem is the most explicit in her course of protest. It seems that the simmering rebellion in her has finally busted and now moves out for some significant action. She rejects her rage being circumscribed in poetry and wants do some concrete action.

The idea to protest against the racial discrimination witnessed by millions of blacks is inspired by their hopeful attitude. A hope to see the change in the society, to be accepted as equals among the whites and to be able to voice their opinion without being treated as the ‘other’. Angelou’s protest is an outcome of the hope that she possessed. She knew her protest would bear fruits. This hope can be seen in her poems too.

Through her poem 'Still I Rise' Maya Angelou wants make the blacks equipped enough to fight. The line '**I am the dream and hope of the slave**' sends out the message that the burden of their autonomy lives on their own shoulders. Rather than being a scapegoat and dominated, they should stand and rise, beyond "the rage of poetry".

Her poem '**The Lesson**' also talks about the idea of hope. The line '**Memories of old tombs**' represent the people who gave up in the struggle against oppression. However the poet refuses to give up and desires to live a full life and make it a healthy place to breathe in.

Maya Angelou's yet another poem '**I know why the caged bird sings**' expresses the idea of positivity. The Caged bird has never witnessed the morning of freedom yet it longs to sing. It has got nothing in life except for his voice which it doesn't let go waste. Therefore it continues to sing and hope for the freedom which would be granted to it one day. Its voice can be heard through the distant hill which means that however the oppressors try to subdue it and lower down its voice; they cannot stop the bird from singing the song of freedom.

In the Article '*The language of Maya Angelou*' by Anne Hudley, she wrote that Maya Angelou was a true inspiration and a guiding force for everyone. She encouraged her readers that they could not only endure whatever challenges life presented but they would always prevail.

Maya Angelou stands as a powerful symbol amongst the blacks who fought with their head and heart for change. It is her subtle words, the powerful images of revolt, defiance and change which bring her amongst renowned black poets. Her "phoenix like" spirit of dying and regenerating is one which makes her an epitome of protest. The book 'Letter to my daughter' is a testimony to her identity. I quote-

"You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them."

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