
Portrayal Of Women, Race, Colour And Patriarchy In I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings

Maya Angelou is a prolific writer who is regarded as women's poet laureate and her poems are considered as the anthems of African – Americans. She is not only a poet but also a memorist, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, actress, historian, film maker and civil right activist. Angelou is one of the most renowned and influential voices of the twentieth century. She was a very pivotal voice, when it came to issues such as gender and racial equality.

According to Emmanuel Sampath Nelson, Maya Angelou's poetry conveys a message of “survival for African – American people to rise above poverty, prejudice and lack of power”. If one want to understand Angelou’s poems one most understand her personal life as narrated in her autobiographies, because her poems are parallel to her own history of racial oppression and survival: I Know Why The Caged Bird Sing(1970), Gather Together in My Name(1974), Singin' and Swingin and getting merry Like Christmas(1976) and The Heart of a Woman(1981)

Ghani and Naz in their article “Race, feminism and Representation: An Inquiry into Maya Angelou's poetry” (2007) describes that Angelou's poems not only manifest control as a whole but also feminist psycho in control of femininity while embodying women on the three different levels: racial, biographical and universal”. Maya Angelou has become a role model for African – American woman by reconstructing the stereotypes of African – American mothers as breeders and matriarchs and has presented them as having a creative and personality fulfilling role. According to critic Mary Jane Lupton, Angelou's journey towards self discovery takes her from “ignorance to knowledge, From silence to speech, From racial oppression to a liberal life”. Her popular volumes of poetry are Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water For I Dillie(1971), And Still I Rise(1987), The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou(1993), Phenomenal Woman(1994), A Brave and Startling Truth(1995), etc...

Angelou's autobiography narrates her growing up years in the racially segregated south were racism ran as a ravine through the town, separating white from black. At the age of eight she is raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. Lisa Giberson tells that, “the rape, criminal trail and consequent murder of the rapist result in Angelou's silence”. She writes her pain in the poem “Born That Way” from the volume I Shall Not be Moved..

Childhood whoring fitted her

For deceit. Daddy had been a

Fondler. Soft lipped mouthings,

Soft lapped rubbings.

A smile for pretty shoes,

A kiss could earn a dress

And a private telephone
Was worth the biggest old caress
As far as possible she strove
For them all. Arching her small
Frame and grunting
Prettily, her
Fingers counting the roses
In the wallpaper
(7-14, 23-28)

Mary Jane Lupton views that, Angelou has been likened to “a songless bird”, who “gives up all singing, all sound during the five years that follow her rape. For five years she is mute, locked in a speechless body as she has wiled it”. Her feeling of imprisonment is expressed in the poem “Caged Bird” which Angelou takes from Paul Lawrence Dunbar's 1896 poem, “sympathy”.

The caged bird sings
With fearful trill
Of the things unknown
But longed for still
And his tune is heard
On the distant hill
For the caged bird
Sings of freedom
(15-22)

Angelou was liberated from her “caged” silence only after Mrs. Flowers, a woman of means and influence in the black communities of stamps, helped her to regain her voice through literature.

Gender discrimination is highly influenced by disparity in the society based on race, colour and caste. It is also a fact that caste discrimination is not found in African – American countries. American patriarchal social system played a very brutal role with the black woman’s life. “ On Diverse Deviations”, Maya Angelou has pointed out the ill effects of American patriarchal

system in black woman's life and her future career such as:

A thousand powered moles,

Where touch to touch is feel

And life a weary whore

(On Diverse Deviations)

The women in the poem was a slave of the white master. The white man want black women for their sexual needs but they do not accept them as their wives or mistress. She was supposed as a whore in the social system.

Through her poems, Angelou expresses about the woman during racial discrimination, segregation and male domination. During her childhood there were discrimination and segregation toward black people. Maya Angelou said in her poem that black people had a bad history around whites.

You may write down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise;

(Still I Rise)

In these lines, Maya Angelou used the word "You" to describe the white and "me" to herself as black race. She writes that, the whites may keep her down with the word "torture" like the history.

Angelou writes about woman's issues and inequality and fiercely condemns gender discrimination, and delineating woman as a slave. She talks about the fact that being woman is like being a slave. She harshly condemns both slavery and gender inequality. The following line express Black woman's suppression.

You may shout 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 6th Stanza)

These lines have some autobiographical elements. It showed the oppression and inequality

faced by Maya Angelou. But in the next line she wrote, "But still like air, I'll rise". It showed her strength and power to survive. No matter what has done and said to her, she still rise and be brave.

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you beset with gloom?

'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells

Pumping in my living room

(Still I Rise, 2nd Stanza)

These lines clearly shows the Black living among whites. These stanza clearly describes oppression and discrimination faced by black woman. But she as the leader of woman said that she never give up. She tried to show it in the 8th stanza:

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide

(Still I Rise, 8th Stanza)

These lines gives an introduction to Angelou's identity. She made a metaphor of black ocean as herself, holding in all the 'shame' and 'pain' of her race and her gender within her tide. She called slavery as "history's shame" and she proclaimed that she would not be held down by the past, even if it was rooted in pain.

In the poem "Caged Bird", Angelou expresses her views on social disparity, freedom and justice. She highlights the issues of racism, sexism, insecurity, poverty and abuse.

But a bird that stalks

down his narrow cage

can seldom see through

his bars of rage

his wings are clipped and

his feet are tied

so he opens his throat to sing

(Caged Bird, 2nd Stanza)

The poem “Caged Bird” describes the actual racial discrimination that existed between the white and black races. It portrays the ugly effect of racism and gives hopes to the black race.

The caged bird sings

With a fearful trill

Of things unknown

But longed for still

And his tune is heard

On the distant hill

For the caged bird

Sings of freedom

(Caged Bird, 3rd Stanza)

In the second and third stanza she goes on to describe the caged bird by using words like 'bars of rage', 'grave', 'fearful' and 'shadow'. These words are references to isolation and they are disturbing compared with freedom. “The caged bird sings with a fearful trill”, this line is ironic as the caged bird is the one singing not the free bird as we expect.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams

His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream

His wings are clipped and feet are tied

So he opens his throat to sing

(Caged Bird, 5th Stanza)

This Stanza illustrated the attitudes black people experiences during segregation. Angelou, used the word “Caged Bird” to represent black people who always got discrimination. The line, “ his wings are clipped and feet are tied” , shows that during this discriminatory era, blacks were in a state of oppression due to the stolen opportunities and the hatred they regularly encountered. The last line showed that the black people race knew it was necessary to have a voice and finally sing for their freedom.

Maya Angelou's another poem "phenomenal Woman" talks about one's self perception about beauty.

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies

I'm not cute or built to suite a fashion model's size

But when I start to tell them

They think I'm telling lies

(Phenomenal Woman, 1st Stanza, 1 to 4 lines)

In those lines, Maya Angelou explains that, even though her appearance is not of a fashion models size, she is still confident in herself and not ashamed of her body. These lines shows her confidence toward her appearance as black woman. This line had same meaning with the 6th and 7th line in the 3rd stanza.

When I try to show them

They say they still can't see

(Phenomenal Woman, 3rd Stanza, 6th and 7th line)

Angelou describes the image of a confident woman in the 2nd stanza. To show her power and confident, Angelou used metaphor and personification in those lines.

I say,

It's the fire in my eyes,

And the flash of my teeth,

The swing in my waist,

And the joy in my feet

(Phenomenal Woman, 2nd Stanza)

In the line "It's the fire in my eyes", she compared her passion to fire. She repeatedly asserts herself as a phenomenal woman.

I'm a woman

Phenomenally

Phenomenal woman

That's me

(Phenomenal Woman)

Maya Angelou described a woman as a great woman of confidence in phenomenal woman. The reader could see in every line of this poem that Maya was so proud of herself because she always said that she was a phenomenal woman. Maya Angelou also tells how the society see her, how the men see her and how the history see her as the black race.

Men themselves have wondered

What they see in me

They try so much

But they can't touch

My inner mystery

When I try to show them

They say they still can't see

(Phenomenal woman, 3rd Stanza)

Angelou used the word "inner mystery" to show that the beauty of a woman is not only from her appearance. The "inner mystery" meant her inner beauty that can't be seen by men who thought the beauty of woman was only from her appearance. This inner beauty can be represented as the power, confident and strength of women.

Angelou also tries to show her inner beauty by caring to each other as a woman and mother.

Now you understand

Just why my head's not bowed

I don't shout or jump about

Or have to talk real loud

When you see me passing

It ought to make you proud

I say,

It's in the click of my heels,

The bend of my hair,

The palm of my hand,

The need of my care,

'cause I'm a woman

Phenomenally

Phenomenal Woman,

That's me

(Phenomenal Woman, 4th Stanza)

Angelou tries to show that as a woman she has positive side. In the line, "It's in the click of my heels", Maya Angelou wanted to show her confidence as a woman, meanwhile in the line "The palm of my hand" showed her caring to others.

Being a phenomenal woman was not easy for a ordinary woman who thinks that the measurement of beauty is beautiful face or good looking. But it was about how a woman become a good person and proud of herself.

Maya Angelou tells us about the sacrifices made by housewife through the poem "Woman Work". In Woman work she explores her notion of slavery and gender inequality. In the poem Angelou confronts the culture of colonialism and double colonization of woman and talking about the theme of slavery and gender inequality at the same time.

I got company to feed

The garden to weed

I've got shirts to press

The tots to dress

The can to be cut

I gotta clean up this hut

Then see about the sick

And the cotton to pick

(Woman Work)

Angelou writes about the quotidian struggles faced by a woman because of the discrimination that has been internalized in the society that makes the woman an inevitable victim of patriarchy. The woman in the poem talks about picking cotton, it is a clear indication of the racial undertone of the poem. The life of a woman seen at into that of a slave.

In the poem "Alone", Angelou brings out the fact that, we have to stand up for each other and

that companionship is very important for every individual and that the materialistic attitude would not help one.

Storm clouds are gathering

The wind is gonna blow

The race of man is suffering

And I can hear the moan,

'cause nobody,

But nobody

Can make it out here alone

(Alone)

This poem is a little remainder for women, and in a feminist view woman need to stand together and face their fears.

Maya Angelou's poems also talks about the traditional binary opposites of gender role, highlighting the inferiority of women and the dominance of men. In the poem 'Men' she says,

Men are always

Going somewhere

They knew I was there

Fifteen years old and starving for them

(Men)

Men enjoy going out and meeting different people while woman stay at home desiring for that kind of freedom and an urge to exercise control like men.

One day they hold you in the

Palms of their hands, gentle, as if you

Were the last raw egg in the world. Then

They tighten up. Just a little. The

First squeeze is nice. A quick hug.

Soft into your defenselessness. A little

more. The hurt begins. Wrench out a

Smile that slides around the fear

(Men)

Through these lines she talks about the sexual urges of a women, natural and normal, but the passivity with which she tries to control her feelings.

Maya Angelou through her poems described her different views on race, gender inequality, feminism and how these themes caused social disparity. Most of her poems are dealing with the identity of black woman as a slave. She dedicates her life to the black women who lives under the threat of white men. Through the life of Maya Angelou, from a ordinary black women to a well recognized female writer and activist, show how to change ones on destiny by educating her self and standing up when failures comes.

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