

SONG OF THE CAGED BIRD: MAYA ANGELOU'S RESISTANCE TO RACISM AND SEXISM IN HER POETRY

Saikat Guha

M. Phil Research Scholar

University of North Bengal, India

Abstract

Incarcerated by the invisible but omnipresent prison of racism, the African-American people can hardly get the scope of self-realization. They are always "represented" as inferior, barbaric, uncivilized by the White America which is characterized by its superior opposites. The poetry of Maya Angelou, who has been a passionate social worker, manifests her concerns for her community which is burdened by the scars of a disturbing past (slavery) and still suffering from racial biases. The victimhood of the Black woman is more serious as she is repressed on the dual grounds of her race and gender. Angelou's poetry connects Art with the broader domain of socio-political activities in an attempt to bridge the gap between the two. This paper aims to read Angelou's poetry as a resistance to the racist and sexist prejudices contaminating the whole African American community and as a liberating song to summon a new era informed by equality and justice.

Maya Angelou wrote in the poem "Equality": "Equality and I will be free." The line has been repeated five times. Freedom does not come without the assurance of equality. The American Emancipation Proclamation on the abolition of slavery in 1863 was only a beginning of a long march to equality. Racial discrimination against the African-Americans is legally prohibited in the United States now, but the social-cultural practices are still rampant. The Black people are victim of what Delgado and Stephancic call "everyday racism" – the racist injustices they face at their daily lives. The promised land of equality is yet unattained by the African-Americans. But the process, rigorously started at the onset of twentieth century, witnessed a number of critical junctures at succeeding periods all of which proved to be instrumental to the attainment of justice. Cultural ghettoization of the Black literature received considerable jolts in the successive movements – the Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts Movement, Black Aesthetics Movement, and so on. It is worth noting that the Black literary movements always went side by side with the political movements. The rearticulation necessary as means of retrieval of suppressed voices can function only within the broader

nexus that incorporates issues pertaining to society, culture, politics and lived daily experiences.

While Angelou is acutely aware of the painful history of her community which is a history of the elite or White America in which the Blacks exist only marginally. The African-Americans seldom see themselves as themselves but through the eyes of the White and thus feel the pull of two conflicting cultures – the African to which they belong and the American to which their aspirations are ideologically directed. W E B Du Bois calls this strange sense of living within the two cultures “double consciousness” of the African-American people which never lets them realize their true self. They are *represented* by the White whose norms they take for granted as normative. When the African-Americans attempt to write their won history, it receives opposition. But the Black activist movements since the 1960s gave impetus to the enunciation of “voices from below” which had long held suppressed. The African-Americans now took up the charge of describing themselves and their culture in their own terms. In the words of Angelou:

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. (Angelou, “Still I Rise”)

Angelou's proposition is to confront each impediment of life and fight back but never to surrender. This mentality, not to yield, is the most effervescent ontological resolution to her. In an interview, Angelou was asked about the importance of knowing oneself and she replied:

[...] we may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. It may even be necessary to encounter the defeat, so that we can know who we are. So that we can see, oh, that happened, and I rose. I did get knocked down flat in front of the whole world, and I rose. I didn't run away – I rose right where I'd been knocked down. And then that's how you get to know yourself. (Angelou, “Conversation”)

The threat on the African-Americans is manifold. Angelou is not unworried less to the oppression on the Black women who are traditionally victims of both racism and sexism. Racism is indiscriminatory treatment of a sect of people by the other – in the context of America, the Black people are deemed to be inferior, uncivilized and uncouth in comparison to the White people who are considered to be the epitome of civilization, superiority and beauty. Sexism, on the other hand, is another such oppressive ideology which denigrates women by positing them below the status of men. Sexism is built on the formulae of gender-bias which overtly or covertly conspires to keep women subservient. As Simone de Beauvoir said woman is never “self”, but always “other” – the “second sex” whose primacy is defeated by the gender roles exercised by the men. The Black woman's condition is worse than that of a White woman because the former suffers from the twofold oppressive paradigms of racism

and sexism which chokes her voice and dissuades her personality to bloom. The attempt to recuperate the position of the Black women began at the first quarter of the twentieth century. W E B Du Bois is one of the first Black male “feminists” who argues in favour of the independence of women of his community. The supposed independence can only be attained with Black women’s education and right to work instead of their damnation in housework and child-rearing. In the chapter “The Damnation of Women” in *The Souls of Black Folk* he writes:

Only at the sacrifice of intelligence and the chance to do their best work can the majority of modern women bear children. This is the damnation of women.

All womanhood is hampered today because the world on which it is emerging is a world that tries to worship both virgins and mothers and in the end despises motherhood and despoils virgins.

The future woman must have a life work and economic independence. She must have knowledge. She must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion. The present mincing horror at free womanhood must pass if we are ever to be rid of the bestiality of free manhood; not by guarding the weak in weakness do we gain strength, but by making weakness free and strong. (Du Bois)

The average Black women’s circle of life is limited to the domestic atmosphere wherefrom there is no way out. As such they are denied participation in the process of full acquirement of their potential and utilization of their talent. Angelou exposes the narrow domestic sphere of the Black women in “Woman Work”:

I’ve got the children to tend

The clothes to mend

The floor to mop

The food to shop

Then the chicken to fry

The baby to dry

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. (Angelou, “Woman Work”)

Such confinement of a Black woman to her household works deters her possibility of self-elevation which Angelou mourns in this poem. The woman ruefully says that there is no man

to pay any attention to her but only the benevolent Nature: “Sun, rain, curving sky/ Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone/ Star shine, moon glow/ You’re all that I can call my own” (ibid).

Black activists at successive generations have opposed the dominance of the White upper-class or working women in the movement mistakenly generalized as “Feminism”. The White women have usually been considered the spokespersons of the movement and thus obscure the reality of women belonging to the lower classes, the African-American community and the Third World. The feminist activist-theorist bell hooks [*sic*] writes of the fallacy of considering Feminism a generalized movement to end sexist oppressions:

To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels – sex, race, and class, to name a few – and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (hooks 194-95)

The framework of White Feminism, argue the leading Black feminist thinkers and writers, like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, is not fit to construe the plight of the Black women who suffer not only from gendered oppressions but also from racism and even class-conflict. The poor Black women are victims of racist prejudices which mount up their already burdened identity as women. The White upper-class and middle-class working women enjoy certain privileges which are unattained to the Black women who comprise a large part of the population of the United States. The latter are not usually allowed to take part in socio-political activities and are mostly confined within the walls of domesticity. A different kind of action is necessary for the women who stand outside the “standard” community, as Lorde says:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference, those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with that other identified as outsider the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*. (Lorde 333-34)

With the growing political activities since the 1960s, however, a growing consciousness has been perceived within the Black women regarding their rights as newly empowered women. They now try to express their anguish and joy, frustration and aspiration in their own idiom which Delgado and Stephancic call “voice of the black”.

A major ground which came into vehement attack by the Black Feminism is the worshipping of physical beauty of the White. The beauty-myth which afflicts the entire

America traditionally centers on women with white-skin. A group of activists protested the Miss America contest in the year 1968, on certain gender-specific culpabilities whose manifesto “No More Miss America!” also incorporated the racial bias of the traditional contest: “Since its inception in 1921, the Pageant has not had one Black finalist, and this has not been for a lack of test-case contestants” (90).

The celebration of black-skin has been a subject of writers of colour at the late twentieth century. Maya Angelou’s “Phenomenal Woman” is a case in observation. Shattering the axioms of beauty that a white-skinned woman is beautiful, Angelou celebrates her black-beauty. She calls herself a “phenomenal woman” whose beauty does not depend on the confirmation of the White, but she is a beautiful woman “phenomenally”. She now comes forward to register her uniqueness:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I’m telling lies.
I say,
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, “Phenomenal Woman”)

Patricia Hill Collins highlights the necessity of bridging the gaps between theory and praxis. Black Feminist standpoint should encompass everyday experiences and specialized thought which again should be identified and caught within the nexus of other socio-political activities and movements in order to maximize its potential:

The earlier definition of Black feminist thought can now be reformulated to encompass the expanded definition of standpoint, the relationship between everyday and specialized thought, and the importance of rearticulation as one key dimension of Black feminist thought. Restated, Black feminist thought consists of theories or specialized thought produced by African-American women intellectuals designed to express a Black women’s standpoint. The dimensions of this standpoint include the presence of characteristic core themes, the diversity of Black women’s experiences in encountering these core themes, the varying expressions of Black women’s Afrocentric feminist consciousness regarding the core themes and their experiences

with them, and the interdependence of Black women's experiences, consciousness, and actions. (Collins 350)

The Black Feminist agenda, instead of being exclusionary or separatist, needs to be merged with other activities to materialize social change for the sake of the African-American community albeit its essential differences.

Angelou had been actively engaged with various activities for the justice and equality of the African-Americans in the United States. She has been a passionate social activist who participated in rallies with such figures as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X all of whom dreamed of a new America resurrected with equality and fraternity. Angelou was much inspired by King's famous speech "I Have a Dream" (1963) where the latter said that even one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the Negro "still is not free", "is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination", "lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity" and "is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land". But King is hopeful nevertheless:

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." (King)

The following lines of Angelou from her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" which was recited on the occasion of Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration in 1993 can be read in parallel to King's speech:

History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes upon
This day breaking for you.

Give birth again
To the dream. (Angelou, "On the Pulse")

Angelou writes in such poems as "Still I Rise" and "Million Man March Poem" how her community men and women collectively refute the opinionated White history, dismantle it and construct their own history smeared with blood and sweat. Race here becomes a more important site of contestation than gender. Angelou voices her anger against types of discrimination and then assertion of her promised reincarnation in these lines:

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.
[...]
Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
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 daybreak 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. (Angelou, "Still I Rise")

Angelou's "Million Man March Poem" is a call to join all the members of her community to stimulate a recuperative and reconfigurative beginning. The African-American community has long been fighting for equality and justice. After the dark night of hellish experiences of slavery and oppression ("The night has been dark,/ And the walls have been steep./ The hells we have lived through and live through still"), the poet sees the auspicious sign of a new dawn. Always rooted in the soil of her African-American history, Angelou exhibits a keen sense of community, as Poetry Foundation observes, "In addition to examining individual experience, Angelou's poems often respond to matters like race and sex on a larger social and psychological scale." The "I" in Angelou's poetry is often inseparable from the "we". The crucial sense of rootedness to her African-American tradition is joined by broader issues of community and political activities. The dream-day of Angelou which would offer equal rights and justice to the Black will not come without the collective endeavour of the members of her community, all and sundry. Angelou pursues the members of her community to come together and clasp hands:

I say, clap hands and let us get from the low road of indifference,
Clap hands, let us come together and reveal our hearts,
Let us come together and revise our spirits,
Let us come together and cleanse our souls,
Clap hands, let's leave the preening

And stop imposterism our own history.

[...]

The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain

We are a going-on people who will rise again.

And still we rise. (Angelou, "Million Man")

The poetry of Maya Angelou illustrates her profound sense of racist oppression that her community of colour has been subjected to. Another layer of oppression that her poetry is aware of is that of sexist oppression which she realizes with her own life-experiences – she was a victim of child sexual abuse and was compelled to work as prostitute for about two years which are only two early examples of her eventful life. What she illustrates in her poetry is the dual working of sexism and racism which attempts to choke the voice of the coloured women. Angelou's poetry is poetry of resistance which not only exposes but resists the oppressive functioning of sexism and racism. Angelou's poetry is also a liberatory song that releases the silenced voices of African-American people. Hers is the song of a caged bird which is held captive by the prisons of racial bigotry, but the song is also inspiring which proclaims a better, optimistic future:

A free bird leaps on the back

Of the wind and floats downstream

Till the current ends and dips his wing

In the orange sun's rays

And dares to claim the sky.

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. (Angelou, "I Know")

Angelou, however, shows more concern for racist discrimination and injustice than sexist oppression which perhaps emanates from her belief that gender inequity can not be achieved prior to the demolition of racial inequality which inflicts her entire community. Her poetry traces the trajectory of African-American tradition and culture, and attempts to recuperate the suppressed arrays of "Negro" culture. Characterized by verve and zeal, Angelou's poetry celebrates her unique sense of Afro-American heritage whose painful history she brings out to provoke the onset of a new dawn.

Works Cited:

- Angelou, Maya. "Conversation with Maya Angelou." Interview by Marianne Schnall. *Feminist.com*. Feminist.com, 12 Oct. 2008. Web. 10 May 2015. <<http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/interviews/mayaangelou.html>>
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Defining Black Feminist Thought." *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. 2nd ed. Eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim. London and New Delhi: Routledge / Rawat Book Sellers, 2012. 341-56. Print.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. "Introduction." *The Second Sex*. Trans. H M Parshley. 1972. *Marxists Internet Archive*. ND. Web. 21 Dec. 2012.
- Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York and London: New York UP, 2001. Print.
- Du Bois, W E B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. *Gutenberg.org*. Project Gutenberg, n.d. Web. 13 May 2015.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. 1982. London: Pluto Press, 1990.
- King, Jr., Martin Luther. "I Have a Dream." 1963. *American Rhetoric*. American Rhetoric, n.d. Web. 10 May 2015. <<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>>
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1979. *The Essential Feminist Reader*. Ed. Estella B. Freedman. New York: Modern Library, 2007. 331-335 Print.
- "Maya Angelou." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 20 May 2015. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/maya-angelou>>
- "No More Miss America!" *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. 2nd ed. Eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim. London and New Delhi: Routledge / Rawat Book Sellers, 2012. 90-91. Print.
- Note** – All the poems of Maya Angelou have been cited in the website *Poemhunter.com* on 5 May 2015.