

## **RACE, FEMINISM AND REPRESENTATION: AN INQUIRY INTO MAYA ANGELOU'S POETRY**

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### ***Abstract***

*The study focuses on Angelou's poetry to capture the phenomenon of resistance in the background of post colonialism. As her poetry is an articulation of the process of struggle for national, racial, and lingual identity. She addresses the dichotomy of black and white, feminity and masculinity, minor and major, self and other, inferiority and superiority, and orient and occident. The analysis of her poetry helps to affix her amid subversive writers who question the dominance and subordination, dealing with the imagery of interspersed themes of lost past, deteriorated present in a cultural context against the colonial enterprise.*

The haunting legacy of Angelou's life and work has shaped a romantic conception of poetry as private, personal and expressive that has governed the reception of subsequent 'American' women poets. The themes of women, poetry and power demonstrate how the canonization of Angelou has consolidated limiting assumptions about women's poetry in twentieth century America. She models an alternative reading practice that allows for deeper engagement with the political work of modern poetry. Angelou's poetry shows how her culture, carrying a history of traumatic violence through generations, led destruction of the non-white culture and history through colonization.

The life and work of Angelou are fully intertwined. Her work is autobiographical. As nobody can bypass one's past and cannot dispense with it so does Angelou. She fails to escape from it. Angelou did not have an easy beginning as a black child and as a writer. She suffered a constant displacement; longing for one lost home after another, and experienced an episode of abuse that resulted in tragedy. She explores

her gradual growth from a black child to a grown-up woman in the background of dominance of a foreign culture, and her poetry is an expression of a constant effort to extricate her from the colors and impact of white aliens. Living in South of Arkansas, in the words of Bloom (1985): "In Stamps Angelou learned what it was like to be a black girl in a world whose boundaries were set by whites." Bloom further converses: "But she learned, also, that blacks would not only endure, but prevail". She realized what it was like to live in a world where everything around her seemed even against the existence of black. "To many Africans only white could be strangers. All Africans belonged somewhere to some clan" (Angelou, 1999). It truly reflects the essence of her struggle to overcome the restrictions that were placed upon her in a hostile environment.

Angelou's poetry and personal narratives form a large picture wherein the symbolic Angelou rises to become a point of consciousness for Afro-American people. Although she does not disown her American past, yet there is an unwavering struggle and quest for her roots and origin. All her poetry is a kind of painful process of recalling and remembering her past which is broken and dismembered in fragments, and an effort to show the black women seeking to survive against masculine prejudice at social or psychological level in addition to white's hatred of black and black's lack of power. To read and respond to her work with understanding is to acknowledge the complex and intricate ways in which the colonial left over influenced her specific background. It would seem as if the intangible sadness of Angelou's youth bled into her remembered self portrait as if pain had actually attempted to substantiate itself in her appearance.

Endowed with incisive psychological and spiritual insights, Angelou seems to have journeyed from disillusioned self to enlightenment and appeals to the modernist sensibility longing for the perseverance of her nativism and dealing with the implied cultural and social differences, ironies and paradoxes. At thematic level she explores the social, psychological and cultural structure of 'Afro-American' society. Her poetry is saturated with the themes of love, loss of love, rejection, social acceptance, racial differences, resistance and national consciousness. "Angelou's poetry covers a wide spectrum of topics" (Cecil, 1998). Socio-psychological inferiority, desire for liberation, and anger against marginalization forms the recurring

patterns of her poetry. Her writings truly show her engagement with the poetics of 'subversion'; by questioning the dominance, power and hegemonic control of the center and black's peripheral treatment. She investigates the influence of the white's culture on black traditions and values. Angelou, through her poetry, endeavors to rediscover the lost self, self-consciously, against the professed universalists and pluralists attitude of the whites. She seeks to carve her physical and spiritual identity as she believes what has been postulated by Walia; "Postcolonial literature depends for its force on the definition of its self-recognition" (cited in Rao et al, 2003). Angelou attains fulfillment of the lost dream of the self. In her writings autobiography assumes the form of her selfhood. As she writes with a twist of lyrical imagery along with a touch of realism, her poems recreate a unique self. It dictates her struggling against the idea of self-effacing infact she is self-promoting. "Not humiliations nor lynching, individual cruelties nor collective oppression had been able to eradicate us from the earth" (Angelou, 1999). Her poems are intensely written testimonial narratives and are striking impersonal and universal account of black self. She opens with a primal childhood scene that brings into focus the nature of the imprisoning environment from which the self seeks escape. The work displays an impulse towards transcendence.

This transition takes place from her later teen years through her mid twenties, focusing on her experiences as a mother, a Creole-cook, a madam, a tap-dancer, a prostitute, a chauffeured, a director and a producer. She does not split-off different roles, positions and dynamics of her personality. She binds together personal, intellectual, philosophical and political issues to bring about the whole truth. Whether it is the theme of a vanished nation, loss of national identity or mother land, memory of the past or neglected woman's cultural integrity, she as a whole person keeps standing behind it. Probyn (1997)'s words about the self-experience substantiate the truth of Angelou's world: "I read every text through my own experience as well as the experience of my mother and my grand-mother". So, here the importance of autobiographical uses of the self becomes evident which can capture characteristic elements of impulse and effective rudiments of conscious relation not feeling against thought but thought as feeling and feeling as thought, and in Angelou's poetry we can see and feel the self as an action and articulation of the life and discursive as the words

of Probyn seem to vindicate this very fact; "Characterization of autobiography is understanding, grounded in an ontological split". All her poetry is a kind of painful process of recalling and remembering of her past which is broken and dismembered in fragments.

Subjectivity and autobiographical tinges not only reassert an economy of control but also manifest feminist psyche in the control of femininity in her poetry. She epitomizes 'woman' on three levels; universal, racial and biographical.

At the 'universal' level, her characterization of woman in every way is a kind of self-representation on the part of a sensitive woman, as the state of being in reality with all its multiple shades, colors and icons. She does not reduce herself into a sexual model of woman rather as a whole human being with the openness of a complete personality. She knows how to position a woman as a human being to some psychic state, as discussing the role of women she asserts: "The woman who survives and intact and happy must be at once tender and tough" (Angelou, 1993). Her poems are written around a logical split. She promotes individual integrity and separateness and devalues the personal and communal interdependency. She presents her own experiences of life as foregrounding to show inherently unpredictable, ever-changing, split and divided character of human personality. Her poetry shows the combination of individual agency and power of woman together. Her typical feminine poems resist and expose this combination and unity of the self, subjectivity at social and psychological level, intertwined. This reflects woman's subordinate position within society and culture which always compel them to shrink themselves to be a romantic individual with their exotic, sensuous and sensual pleasures. The concept of woman in her poetry provides an entity that binds together all women in the face of racial, national and other differences. She is more self-aware human and representative of women from the position of silenced, deprived and unprivileged.

In Afro-American poetry 'gender' has become a prominent sign of resistance especially because it has unified the concept of 'black' and 'female'. As a black woman, Angelou has her own expression of political, social, psychological and sexual dynamics and oppression which has helped shaping her views and philosophy of life. "Black women became realities only to themselves. To others they were

mostly seen and described in the abstract, concrete in their labor but surreal in their humanness” (Angelou, 1998). She knows and has suffered the anguish of slavery, segregation and racism. “Black women wrestled with the un-escapable horror of undergoing pregnancies that could only result in feeding more chattels into the rapacious man of slavery” (Angelou, 1998). Besides, her poetry elaborates black feminist female identity also. She believes that whosoever loves her must pay due respect to her words, must adore her of being black, must pay homage to her feelings, and should not be ashamed of her natural belongings of race, and esteem her present and past equally. It is her poetry which operates at the level of not only poetry but also involves the real world in showing all her differences, powerlessness and relegated position as key images in the Afro-American society. Her poetry is an endeavor of the relocation of the self and retrieval of the native culture. She gives a vivid description of woman's position within a culture where she is treated as a goddess, a commodity or an object of suppression. She feels the things around her intensely and expresses them with wide magnitude and depth. Nevertheless, she is conscious of the fact that there are restraints on her experiences and there is lot of contempt for her gender specification. Along with it she uses man's image to correspond to the self of woman which has its own reality. “The African man is more faithful than the European, not because he loves his woman more than the European loves his woman but because he loves himself more than the European man loves himself” (Angelou, 2003).

The romantic notion that a writer writes in response to internal imperatives go hand in hand with the notion of feminism in her poetry. However, Angelou is an exception because she not only points to dynamic moving and fluctuant condition of all conscious held biological identity but also the fact of her own specific being. She always lays great emphasis upon the importance of individual situation especially with reference to the individuality of woman. She brings two spheres of the self out by showing the individuality of woman and as a part of whole. For her self is not one sided, inert, fixed or singular self. So, the image of the self is to put forward the verity in different ways. The self is a unifying principle of all women who are oppressed and silenced to recognition. Angelou is the one who has the courage to break the patriarchal conventions to enjoin women to deferential

silence. She deviates from the dominant psychic structure, models, paradigms and paragons of her society, for her sexuality is not parallel to social silence. 'A woman must resist considering herself a lesser version of her male counterpart' (Angelou, 1993). She is conscious of the need of feminist emancipation from patriarchy which is a cultural contract and inevitable for female identity. She believes, in the words of Thiong' (1989) that no cultural liberation is possible without women liberation. In this backdrop she turns our attention towards the difficulties and problems of women and gives valuable insights into their thoughts and feelings and "the burden of feminine sensibilities suffocated by masculine responsibilities" (Angelou, 1998).

Like other feminists Angelou rejects the idea of genderless creative imagination. She hardly escapes from the unconscious structures and the strictures of the female identity. Her imagination is socially, psychologically, sexually, historically and politically positioned self which shows her whole personality. It is Angelou who questions the making and existence of the self in gender and social relation and its cultural importance. She seeks refuge in her individual being with all the differences. Angelou stands side by side to Chodorow (1997) who in her article 'Feminism and Psychoanalysis Theory' argues: "Our experience as men and women come from deep within both within our pasts and relatedly within the deepest structures of unconscious meaning and the most emotionally moving relationship that helps to constitute our deity life".

The same notion that men and women are differently constructed and have emotional meaningfulness is what Angelou agrees regarding her view of women. She is simultaneously a passionate girl, a sister, a lover, a prostitute, a beloved a mother, a nationalist etc., and thus in her poetry self transforms into different shapes, names, structures and acquires forms in accordance to the situation. Her focus of attention is woman, not only to reify female marginalization but also to bring into limelight her beauties to defend her creative gifts and highlight her imaginative and intellectual abilities and truths. "Women should be tough, tender, laugh as much as possible, and live long lives, the struggle for equality continues unabated, and the woman warrior who is armed with wit and courage will be among the first to celebrate victory" (Angelou,1993).

Angelou does not simply accept the label of 'bearer of emotions' as Thompkins (1987) postulates in the background of feminism, but in fact tries to bring forth the other complementary side of half truth that woman is a rational being also. She does not like her to be bound with man in relationship. Angelou's notion of oppression of woman produces the image which leads to truncated life based on her pride on gender and her individual being with reference to poverty, lack, deprivation, illiteracy, silence, traditional boundaries and constraints etc. An image of a woman who is domesticated, family bounded, traditionally tied, victimized and restrained in her creative abilities. She does not draw a line of contrast between herself and a modern woman rather she looks at her as one who has forgotten her self and identity. She does not look at the woman as normative reference rather as a real and physical truth.

'Nationalism', a tool to survive against colonial power, is a central and persistent theme in the whole Afro-American poetry especially of Angelou's, who is well aware of the complex formation of national consciousness in modern societies. Being modern she does not consider nationalism as mere a political idea rather she takes it as a binding force. Angelou's obsession with national identity is not illegitimate as Plamentaz postulates that it is too natural, rational and logical (cited in Lawson, 1997). She enjoys her own voice as she rejects to accept conventional marginality by staying faucet or in a relegated position. Her poetry reflects the keen observation of that passionate search for national identity, homeland and relaxation against the anxiety produced by this legitimate reason. Her poetry is a sort of combat and war for the existence of black as a nation and as human beings at equal level. She does not take geography, language, culture and religion into account to be the components and determining national failures rather talks about the identity of disparate elements given the idea of equality and uniformity of human beings. "Our young must be taught that racial peculiarities do exist, but that beneath the skin, beyond the differing features and into the true heart of being, fundamentally we are more alike" (Angelou, 1993). She puts all her efforts to rationalize her self-consciousness through the art of conformity to the American society and sometimes as a rebellion the shape of a black political activist as much that her egoism and pride becomes stronger than her narcissism.

The most linked idea to nationality is 'race'. Angelou is conscious of the facts related to blackness. In this regard Fanon's (1989) view corresponds to the very fact; "The superficial difference is the body and voice, (skin, color, hair texture, body, shape, language, accent) are read as indelible signs of the natural inferiority of possessors; which is the sign of denigration". Angelou's poetry is the poetry of black consciousness. She portrays, through her life long experience, the taboos, patterns and socio-psychological gaps between the whites and the blacks. The reiteration of word black in her poems is a deliberate effort towards overturning version of cultural, racial and language inferiority.

The recurring theme of 'resistance' through the idea of nationalism against imperial control is used in her poetry as a 'self image' which Ashcroft (1995) in the background of feminism refers as 'imaged community' to invent a self image through which they can liberate themselves from imperialist oppression. Among other themes of resistance, the idea of 'marginalization' is central as it undermines the sense of collectivity and Angelou focuses on it. Resistance is seen as a process of cultural liberation by her, a kind of rebellion against white's supremacy to gain control over how they are represented. For her colonization is the utter rejection of their national, social and cultural identity.

Angelou's poetry substantiates the image in the shape of the cultural and linguistic oppression which developed the socio-psychological vacuum and void. Angelou successfully brings forth the images of exploitation of black and overall domination of whites. She artfully captures through the words racial superiority, political imperialism, will to subordinate and enslave the black, and she groans with the depth of her pain and rage over this inhuman attitude towards black. As Bloom (1985) postulates that "Much of Angelou's poetry, almost entirely short lyrics, expresses in strong, often jazzy rhythms, themes common to the life experiences of many American blacks - discrimination, exploitation, being on welfare." She further adds, "Other poems deal with social issues and problems which, though not unique to blacks, are explored from a black perspective". She tries to build a 'self' and 'identity' after having battled with the hatred of whites with repressed anger. She goes through the turbulence of an oppressed community's actual experience and sense of self despite



socio-political change and development. She paradoxically and ironically depicts racist domination and its impact on the lives of the marginalized people, the way they are victimized and psychologically wounded. "A certain amount of paranoia is essential in the oppressed or in any likely targets of oppressors" (Angelou, 1993).

The construct of the 'Otherness' is another forceful theme of Angelou's writings. She illustrates psychological truths of white's empowerment, supremacy, superiority and control which have not yet changed. Blacks are codified as 'Others', non-American, non-Western etc. Angelou despises the Western dualistic frame and the idea which sees the East as Minor and her own self as a Major, as for Angelou it is a way to deny the variousness of people by stereotyping them or refusing their exclusive being. She as a progressive black political activist faces the wounds of her ancestors, courageously, to heal them. She makes efforts to transform the image of black from an alien to a human being. She wants to bring positive change by not looking at this situation as status quo.

As Rao (2003) argues: 'there is an organic relation between language and culture', and Angelou's poetry manifests this relation firmly. Her preoccupation with culture is legitimate as culture, art, history and literature are always interrelated. As the negation of one's self is the negation of entire culture and history, so the experience of the denigration of her community, sense of loneliness with reference to displacement and alienation show the cultural and political truth of her epoch.

Angelou has bestowed with unique perception and power of multiple interpretation of a single phenomenon as far as her 'style' is concerned. It is apparent that Angelou is keen, sharp, earthly, imaginative, lyrical, spiritually bold, and seems destined for distinction. Her poetry "draws heavily on her personal history but employs the points of various personae" (Britannica Online 9/17/98). She has a literary style that reflects and embodies the quality of thought, having a conjunctive style of clarification, distinctive regarding her writings, usually refusing morphology, and which can not be taken as pallid, laden despair, self-indulgent and disconnected. It sometimes turns into a kind of surreal experience through musical words, simple, direct, flowery, preserving typical female imagination by adding female

fantasies through her peculiarities of tone, structure, voice and plot. In the words of Braxton: "Readers of her poetry appreciate its rhythm, lyric imagery, and realism." Moreover, she appends that "the people who read Angelou's work include both critics and lay readers, and she has achieved a measure of true sainthood in their eyes by transcending brutal racism, sexual abuse, and poverty to become one of America's most celebrated contemporary writers" (Braxton, 1991). She seems eager to understand a world that is today fast escaping from political control to evoke feelings of alienation, and expresses thought for sake of communication. She does not hallucinate being a part of black world rather plays with possibilities and psychological truths without refusing the realities associated to the Afro-American society. Although, sometimes she becomes the mouth-piece of typical Afro-American downtrodden oppressed lot yet she retains her specific position as a universal writer of human being above from the national, racial, lingual, religious and geographical levels.

The texture of her poetry is the skeleton architecture of the real life. She owes the art of transposing feelings into language eloquently. She knows how to integrate the feelings and thought, passion and reality, abstract and concrete, actuality and transcendental truths. The use of native proverbs, slang and colloquial language lends it a color of its own and helps to shape her conception of identity, self and acknowledgments. She pleasurable mixes rhythm, variety, musicality, multiplicity as distinct features in her poetry.

To conclude Angelou's poetry is the conscience of Afro-Americans, especially for the black women who have to survive struggling against masculine prejudice and hatred of whites. As in the words of Angelou: "The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors, and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance" (Angelou, 1999).

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