

## **Beyond Boundaries: Transnational Feminist Reading of Kishwar Naheed's 'I am not that Woman' and Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise'**

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### **Abstract:**

The emerging trend of transnational studies tries to learn the literature of the world in the light of comparison. The themes and ideas that are similar around the globe despite national borders are what it tries to study. The American poet Maya Angelou is acclaimed for her works that speak for the freedom of individuals. Her works have been appreciated widely for its theme of strong protest against the discrimination of black communities and women. Kishwar Naheed, the Pakistani Urdu poet shares the sentiments of Angelou as her poetry echoes the same theme of protest. Considered as a major feminist poet from Pakistan Naheed's poetry reflect the plights that women face. This study tries to explore how the themes discussed in Angelou and Naheed are similar in its tone of protest. The transnational feminist reading helps to investigate how the condition of women remain same despite the geographic boundaries.

**Keywords:** Transnational, transnational feminism, patriarchy, gender, race

The early twentieth-century American writer Randolph Bourne is credited for popularising the term 'Trans-National'. Bourne used the term to define a relationship that he found between cultures. With the advent of globalisation, the concept of transnationalism gained current. Later the concept broadened to include diaspora studies in which migration became the major theme of study. The beginning of postcolonial literature marked the writing of protest. Literature became a major weapon to fight against the forces that suppressed the individual. Widening its range, today, transnational studies include the aspects of protest literature. The similarity of oppressive forces and victimisation and the fight against this is studied.

Patriarchy is an overwhelming social force in which men are given the supreme power in all aspects of life including the social, political and economical. Originating from Greek roots the word 'patriarchy' literally means the rule of the father. Beginning from the image of the father as the autocratic ruler of the family, the term later enlarged its frame to denote a social system where men held power. The exclusion of women from all aspects of led to a strong protest against this. Women writers from all points of time have used writing as a means to depict this deplorable condition and as a way to protest against this supremacy. Postcolonial weapon of writing back saw the coming of women to write against the patriarchal force that oppressed them. Feminism thus emerged as a major preoccupation of

postcolonial society thus transnational studies developed its reach to include transnational feminism.

Transnational feminism rejects the terms such as 'international' and 'global' as it excludes the women of the third world and fourth world countries. Transnational feminism in literature explores how the predicaments faced by women as represented in literature carries similarity across the globe. The 1994 text, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* are considered as the seminal text that gave vogue to the term 'transnational feminism'. Authored by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, the book investigates how globalisation, neoliberalisation has effected women. This theory ushers in a solidarity between women and it also recognizes the essential differences. The theory thus becomes a palate where the colours of similarities and dissimilarities are compared, mixed and studied. Quoting Grewal and Kaplan "...[S]uch a terrain for coalition and cooperation, however, we have to rearticulate the histories of low people in different locations and circumstances are linked by the spread of and resistance to modern capitalist social formations even as their experiences of these phenomena are not at all the same or equal." (Grewal and Kaplan 50) It also includes the movements and activism that is organised internationally on behalf of women.

Considered as one of the strongest voices that spoke for black people and women, Maya Angelou's works reflect the pains of racial discrimination and gender inequality. The American poet, singer, memoirist and civil rights activist is best known for the seven autobiographies that she wrote on her childhood experiences. The first among them *I know why the Caged Birds Sings* (1969) took her to international recognition. The book discusses her life up to the age of seventeen. Her works question the notions of race, gender, identity, family and try to highlight how these forces oppress an individual especially a woman. A prolific and successful poet, Angelou, as she writes in one of her autobiographies *A Song Flung up to Heaven*, has been considered as "the black woman's poet laureate", and her poems have been called the anthems of African Americans.

Influenced by Progressive Writer's Movement in South Asia who were anti-imperialist and left-oriented advocating writing as a method to fight inequality, Kishwar Naheed the Pakistani Urdu poet used her pen to fight against the oppressive force upon women. Her prolific oeuvre elevates her to the position of being considered as the matriarch of Urdu poetry. She is most famous for her poem 'We Sinful Women' which among Pakistani feminists as the women's anthem. The title of the poem was adopted as the title of an anthology of contemporary Urdu feminist poetry, translated and edited by Rukhsana Ahmad. It was published in London by The Women's Press in 1991. Her poems deal with the inequalities that women face and are a continual effort to uplift and empower them. Naheed's poems are the strong and powerful voice that speaks for women against patriarchy. In an interview with Herald Naheed says "[T]his freedom to write and express has come through a struggle drenched in tears".

Maya Angelou's 1978 collection of poems *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems* contain one of her much acclaimed and anthologised poem "Still I Rise". A collection of thirty-two

poems divided into three parts, the book is marked for its spirit of resistance that Angelou asserts in all her works. Naheed's poem "I am not that Woman" is a poem that is non-conformist in nature. The poem strikes a resistance against the overwhelming patriarchal forces. Both Kishwar Naheed and Maya Angelou are poets who tried to speak openly about the discriminations that exist in the world on the basis of race and gender. Their poetry questions the politics of a male chauvinistic world which oppresses a woman in all aspects. Both poets though come from different geographical points, their poems carry a similarity in its sympathies.

The poems "Still I Rise" and "I am not that Woman", both written in a first person point of view, begins by an outright rejection of the traditional definition of the image of a woman. Angelou begins her poem so:

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies, (1-2)

The history that the poet refers to is further defined as 'bitter' and 'twisted' lies. This denotes the truth that is corrupted and constructed. History, which forever has been in the hands of the powerful is manipulated to project the image of the marginalised class in a dark light, i.e. as the poet herself says, a tendency to 'trod' them 'in the very dirt'. But the stanza ends with the refrain that marks the resilience of a group to resurrect themselves from the dirt, the poet writes, "But still, like dust, I'll rise". Naheed's poem begins by directly explaining the 'twisted lies' that Angelou refers to. The initial lines also strike up the drastic contrast in the life of a man and a woman. The poem opens by asserting that she is not the woman who sells socks and shoes. The poet speaking to the patriarchal world which ignorant towards the situation of women in life tries to make them remember that she is the one they tried to muffle beneath the walls of stones. Naheed just like Angelou ends the poem with a line of resistance that her "voice cannot be smothered by stones".

Both poems are written in the form of a conversation where the speaker is the poet herself, representing the female world, and the addressee is the male world of power. Naheed's poem exposes the stereotypical image of a woman that the society has created. She speaks of the woman who is weighed down in life by the boulders of tradition and customs. The 'flower', 'thorn' image used in the poem refers to the patriarchal notion of female chastity and honour, according to which a woman who lost her virginity to a man is thought to become his slave forever. Naheed also uses her poetry as a strong weapon to attack the customs of society such a marriage. She openly speaks of it as a business where a woman is reduced to the position of a merchandise that is 'bought' and 'sold'. She attacks the image of a father by portraying him as someone who marries a girl off "to get rid of a burden." The position of the woman as a mere product and her being as the attributes of the product is depicted when she writes,

I am the commodity you traded in,

My chastity, my motherhood, my loyalty. (28-29)

Maya Angelou's poem strikes directly at the male pride that defines women as a group subordinate to them. She speaks of the woman's sassiness and her walk that is objected to

male voyeurism and criticism. She speaks of a world that ‘shoots’ women with ‘words’, a world that ‘cuts’ her with ‘eyes’ and finally ‘kill’ her with ‘hatefulness’ This refers to the verbal abuse that women are subjected to, the vast corpus that neglected the condition of women, that made them invisible and portrayed them as something different. The judgemental looks that women encounter every day, the male gaze that questions women and finally the hatefulnes that is harboured in the heart that kills a woman. The poet speaks of the “huts of history’s shame” pointing history that became an abode of such shameful acts and “a past that’s rooted in pain” referring to the past inundated in suffering.

Both the poems, on one hand, speaks of the sufferings and on the other speaks of the resistance. Naheed while speaking of each instance of suppression offers the alternative of liberation. She speaks of ‘chains’ that “cannot [be] smother[ed] my fragrance”. The ability of women to rise against odds is referred to as,

I can walk on water

When I am drowning. (21-22)

The independence that women deserve is written as “it is time for me to flower free.” Angelou’s poem contains a more assertive and direct attack against the oppressor. The poem contains levels of meaning because the suffering that the poet speaks is not only one that of a woman but of a coloured woman. Angelou speaks of the discrimination that is put forth on the black community. Her poem thus speaks of the double oppression one that is caused based on race and other based on gender. The final lines of the poem reject all these biases and show the poet leaping to a world where all these walls are broken. The poem ends with a powerful note,

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. (33-43)

The titles of both the poems are present within it as a refrain. It echoes throughout the poem as a powerful note of resistance. Angelou and Naheed come from two different parts of the world. Their social political ambience is entirely different from one another but their

poems find a unison as they speak about the same dilemma. From a transnational feminist point of view, both the poems speak about the condition of women in a male-dominated society. How the Self which is the patriarchal world reduces women into a group of Other or subaltern is shown in poems. Non-conformist in its values the poems speak about the freedom of an individual and the need to break away the stereotypical roles that society has constructed.

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