

The Poetics Of A Phenomenal Woman: A Study Of Select Poems Of Maya Angelou**B. Silviya**

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Abstract

This paper tries to capture the image of a suppressed woman who later with her courage and valor breaks the shackles of racism and prejudice. The text chosen for the study are “Still I Rise” and “Phenomenal Woman”, two remarkable poems by Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou was an American poet who is known for her autobiography “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”. The present article tries to look Maya Angelou from a feminist perspective. However the researcher also aware of the fact that feminism globally and in Afro-American context is different. These two poems explicitly and figuratively alludes to the plight of black women.

Keywords: Feminism, Racism, Suffrage, marginalization, empowerment.

The poems of Maya Angelou generally serves as the voice for black women. For example in the poem “Still I Rise”, Maya Angelou talks about the suffrage of black women in the Afro-American society. In spite of their suffrage, black women have the power to rise from their relegated position. The poem vividly portrays that black women are kept in the subordinated position both in society and in their home. In another poem “Phenomenal Woman”, black women are challenging both the patriarchy and the white women supremacy. These two poems show the radical spirit of black women who fearlessly challenge the outward society and

prove them to be phenomenal women. In the poem the poet is an embodiment of and picturesque representation of all black women. Black women are now not in the relegated position but uplifted themselves to be equal counterparts with other women in the world. As such, black women captures the attention of not only men but also the white women. These poems talk about the phenomenal growth of black women. The progression of black women is seen in their spirit to fight against white supremacy and come over their restricted boundaries. The poem also pictures how the black women break out the barriers and shine in front of the pretty women. The poet has successfully deconstructed the conventional image of black women to be slaves and always suppressed by everyone. Finally the black women in the poems, are liberated by their perseverance to some extent. By being audacious, the poet has emancipated herself from the conventional image of the triple marginalization of black women.

Maya Angelou has succeeded in showing the hardships of the black women to the world. She has also displayed female empowerment, racial prejudice and sexual objectification of women in her poems. The poet has expressed her own experiences in her poems, thus by giving voice on behalf of all other black women. Her poems strongly convey the message of empowerment to the black women and to show up the confidence in them. In her poems, she describes how a single woman emerges out of the white supremacy. She also insists that a woman who may be a black, or of a lower caste or any subaltern, she should empower herself by any other means. If she is brave and has the courage to fight for her own rights and the courage to do as her wish against the society, she must have the tenacious mindset to face everything.

Being a black woman, everyone looks down upon her and she has been misrepresented in the writings of other figures. But Maya Angelou represents the black woman as she is thus by

breaking the conventional image of the black woman. She rises like dust by igniting the radical spirit in all black women. The poet is gaining attention and distracting the people looking at her. She says,

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, 5-8)

Despite the brute subjugation of the black woman, the poet walks like she has owned oil wells. The power of wealth as she has earned something can be seen in her walk. By tearing the web of oppression like moons, suns, and tides with hope she rises. She describes it as follows:

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I’ll rise. (Still I Rise, 9-12)

The poet has now adopted a dominating role and thus she is challenging the people who once ridiculed her. She tends to design a new black matriarch image by rising from whatever she is pulled to. She questions whether the people are waiting to see her broken and bear the unconditional pain. She answers them with her laugh as if she has gained gold mines. This is put forth by bell hooks in *Aint I a woman?*: “once black women are deluded and imagine that we

have power that we don't really possess, the possibility that we might organize collectively against sexist-racist oppression is reduced" (81).

The poet says people may kill her with their words, eyes and hatefulness but still she rises like air. She reflects the reality of the people who look at the black woman. Their mood changes according to the behavior of the black woman in the opposite way. She is a black ocean who widens her prospect and thinking by leaving behind the negative stereotypes. She rises into a daybreak with hope and gifts that she got from her ancestors. She realizes that she is the dream and hope of many black women slaves.

The poet has clearly shown her personal struggles in her life and also how she overcame everything. She insists that one should never stop fighting until they get their freedom. She also insists that she will never allow anything to stop her fight. There were people who wanted to dump her or bury her but still she rises before them like the sun which never stops raising. She portrays truly the life of a slave and also the courage to overcome everything and to crumble the problems under her feet and rise.

In the poem "Phenomenal Woman" it is crystal clear that she has fought for gender equality. She has clearly shown that women can easily win not only men but also women in case of racism doth seems to oppress her.

Maya Angelou is wondered by even pretty woman. The beauty lies within her. Here, being a black woman the poet is presents her beauty in front of the white woman. Every women look at her and they wonder where her beauty lies. This proves that the poet is a phenomenal woman. It's because it is believed that, "... nonwhites are absent/invisible is because they are

not white.”(*Feminism is for Everybody Passionate Politics*,55) Being a black woman she is not cute or as per the conventional image of a pretty woman but still pretty women wonder her beauty. She tries to explore the secret but the women did not believe her. She boldly expresses her structure of the body. She puts it as,

It’s in the reach of my arms,

The span of my hips,

The stride of my step,

The curl of my lips. (Phenomenal woman, 6-9)

Men bend their knees before the poet and they swam around her like honey bees. She says that it is because of her body parts like eye, teeth, waist, feet. Men also wonder about her beauty but they can’t touch her inner mystery. She has been now totally liberated and become a phenomenal woman. Her head is not bowed to any woman or man. She really does not to make any noise to show her arrival. It is because as she says,

It’s in the click of my heels,

The bend of my hair,

The palm of my hand,

The need for my care. (Phenomenal Woman, 53- 56)

Now, she has completely become a phenomenal woman and also a liberated woman. As bell hooks says in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, “Liberation theologies see the

liberation of exploited and oppressed group as essential acts of faith reflecting devotion to divine will. Struggles to end patriarchy are divinely ordained”(107).

Maya Angelou has left the footmarks of her so that other black women could follow her path and come up in the society and face everything with more courage. They need not be supposed to be in fear thereafter. She has shown the way to the women especially the black women to lead their life as a phenomenal woman.

The poet has used the aspiring tone in this poem such as, “The stride of my step”, “The joy in my feet”, “The grace of my style”, “the click of my heels”. She is enjoying the way she is living. She is happy that she is leaving the mark for other women to follow her in the same aspiration. She has literally created or drawn the physical image of a woman in her poem. This shows the love for herself and the self-confidence in her.

The poet has used the refrain,

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me. (Phenomenal Woman, 10-13)

to insist the main idea that she truly is a phenomenal women. She empowers the black woman that they can do what they love and also they can fight for their equality.

“Liberal feminism conceives of freedom as personal autonomy – living a life of one's own choosing..” (Liberal Feminism). The poet has been living her life as she wishes against the

conventional image of an African woman. This makes other people to wonder at her. She comes out of her circle with much courage to face the society.

Thus, the article recaptures the image of black women from a feminist perspective. Maya Angelou being an American woman, activist, singer, feminist, poet and author went through several struggles in her life still, she rose and has become a phenomenal woman. She has struggled to survive and rise, so that every other black woman could get the courage and to pursue their freedom in the society. The persona and her self-portrait has lifted many other black women. The poet has fought against the oppression with optimism.

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