

Lines Composed to Motivate: A Critical Study of Select Poems

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Abstract

With the heavy toll that the Covid-19 virus has taken on human beings, the picture of inevitable death as the ultimate goal of life has appeared to all more prominently. There is no denying the fact that this deadly virus has permeated the myth created by scientific developments regarding humans to be the invincible champions among beings residing on planet earth. This microscopic being of a virus has posed a great challenge to the whole gamut of humanity which has been busy with no such pandemic over many years. Though the virus has its origins in China, it has shown mercy to no country that came on its way and infected everyone who stood a chance of getting infected. Not even the two world wars fought in the last century could muster potential enough to bring humans to such a level where the rich and the poor were treated alike. The scenes of people dying for lack of oxygen, the events of people being almost becoming untouchables and social outcasts on account of being contracted with the virus, the scenes of dead bodies waiting at burning ghats and burial grounds on account of the hugeness in numbers of deaths and many other disturbing instances occurring around the globe on account of this pandemic may question the existence of the intrinsic motivation that propels one to live the life that is everything before death. At such a time when the denizens of this planet are trying to

wrestle with the deadly microscopic monster with weapons such as masks, sanitizers, vaccines, and social distance, how far can poetry motivate a soul? The present paper aims to critically study select poems that can even motivate life in such times of domination of death.

Keywords: Covid-19, Pandemic, Death, Poetry, Motivation.

Introduction:

The word motivation draws its origin from the Latin word *movere*, which means “to move”. Again, the word motivation is found to be derived from the English word “motive” which means a reason for an action. Therefore, the word motivation can be understood as a term which means to move, or to activate or to direct our existence and behaviour towards certain reasonable actions that possess a goal to achieve. “Motive is always internal to us and is externalized via behaviour” (Khanka 175). Any motive is understood as the expression of an individual’s goals and needs. Human behaviour is directed to anything significant with the aid of motive. If life is the context, anything that aims at moving and activating life-force is taken to be motivating life which has the ultimate goal of living meaningfully with the creation of purpose for contributing to the cause of the existence of human civilization. “Poems ‘inspire hope during these dark days,’ says Rafael Campo, a poet, and physician at Harvard Medical School. As he put it in a TEDxCambridge talk in June 2019, ‘Poetry sparks empathy, and empathy is essential for our survival.’” (*The Washington Post*). True to what is mentioned, lines of poetry stand to motivate life in times of stress like the present.

Discussion:

In the play *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* written by William Shakespeare, Cassius, the Roman nobleman and the keenest among the conspirators, utters, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings.” (Act I, Scene II, L. 140-141). Though Cassius delivers the above phrase to Brutus to further his steps towards the completion of the formulation of conspiracy against Julius Caesar, the then Roman Emperor and Brutus’s friend, the word do motivate one to rise above the situations and conditions that tend to define and limit one’s existence in this world ruled by set beliefs. The lines speak in favour of coming out of the labyrinth of fear and asserting one’s existence with confidence.

The first poem that etches a mark in this regard is “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me” by Maya Angelou. The poem forms an integral part of the Angelou’s book by the same name with bright illustrations for children. Though the book chiefly appeals to children, it “celebrates the courage within each of us, young and old” (Kane). The poem embraces a universal appeal because it is all-encompassing in its inclusion of difficulties and challenges that act as stumbling blocks in the way of individuals in general and the poet-speaker in particular. The poem begins with the mention of unknown fears in the form of “shadows” and haunting “noises” that tend to frighten and demotivate. However, the poet takes a brave stance to allay such baseless fears. The images of “lions” loosened and “Dragons breathing flame” are akin to any larger-than-life problems that threaten to disintegrate our existence into nothingness. Such images inculcating fear and anxiety can easily be compared to dominating forces in the society that tend to be guiding and essentializing us all the time. The poet furthers her motivating spirit by paying negligible attention to such elements. Other frightening images occurring in the poem include that of “Panthers”, “Strangers”, “frogs and snakes” and the boys who pull the hair of a girl in the “new

classroom”. All of these seem to be demoralizing and demotivating when they take on the nerves of an individual in society. The poet’s being as a girl further makes her mention the disturbing boys who hurt little girls in the classroom by pulling their hair. The dreadful silhouette of a panther in the dark or an unknown danger in the form of a stranger creates a meaning of domination in the beholder’s mind; all the same, they do not affect the confidence and strong belief of the poet-speaker in the poem. The portrayal of fearful snapshots makes her even stronger and doesn’t make her cry. Charged with confidence, she feels motivated towards her living life in the bravest way possible:

I’ve got a magic charm
That I keep up my sleeve,
I can walk the ocean floor
And never have to breathe.
Life doesn’t frighten me at all. (Angelou)

For the present situation that the world is going through, the poem “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me” by the celebrated American poet Maya Angelou may impart a considerable level of confidence and motivating spirit that should help in taking life as a challenge to live bravely.

In the year 1862, a prolific year for the poet Emily Dickinson, she wrote a moving poem, “‘Hope’ Is The Thing With Feathers”. The poem treated hope as a metaphor, a feathered bird that is permanently settled in the soul of every human. The mythical story of Pandora’s box also shows hope to be the only good left with human beings in the world ridden with diseases and other complexities that invoke human suffering. It is well-conceived by any logic-driven individual that hope is the only positive element that guides us at times of intolerable negativity.

At such moments of withering hope, the poem “Invictus” (1875) by William Ernest Henley may be invoked for motivation. The word “Invictus” means unconquerable or undefeated in Latin. Throughout the body of the poem Henley has brightened thoughts on the inspiration that move away stumbling blocks that tend to demean the spirit yearning to reach the goal. Dedicated to the Scottish flour merchant Robert Thomas Hamilton Bruce, the poem has able admirers across the globe for its highly inspirational lines. It is said that Nelson Mandela himself liked the poem very much and the poem also features in a movie on the great leader. To call the poem as a poem that simply motivates would be quite hackneyed a realization. The lines of “Invictus” breathe of ingenuity that generates the latent leader sleeping within each one of us. Every challenging situation in life poses before us moments of uncertainty and confusion. The poet expresses his concern at the coming up of a “night” that is “Black as the pit from pole to pole” (Henley) and diminishes the same with equal ease based on the confidence that he has in his unconquerable soul. The poet talks of remaining unmoved and focused with head held high when larger-than-life circumstances threaten. Even sudden and out-of-the-blue happenings do not seem to etch any mark of disturbance in his mind. Though hurt and blood-stained, he talks of staying stuck to fighting for life and living. The present situation of the Covid-19 pandemic can be taken as such a sudden revelation of unprecedented danger that apparently takes on all of our nerves and therefore looks forward to dominating our senses in perceiving the world around us. This telling upon on us by a monstrous microscopic being would make us weak in our existence as humans with all such qualities that portray us as human beings. So we need to overcome this calamity with the redoubled spirit that defines us to be the best creation of eternity.

The poet Henley further dislocates the fear of death and any such impending doom that tries to dampen the spirit of humanity. All that is before death is life, and Henley perceives that with enough confidence to find him not frightened at all with anything that challenges the existence of his consciousness of being alive. The lines that leave any reader awe-struck and motivated at the same time are the last two lines that inspire instantly as one reads, “I am the master of my Fate / I am the captain of my soul.” (Henley). Human beings cannot comprehend anything of this life before they are born, neither can they relate to anything after their consciousness passes on to oblivion post-death; what is left for them is to create their narrative of life when they are alive. Henley assigns this credible job to all alive to his lines.

Many a time do we feel oppressed under the suppression of megalomaniac elements of society. These elements become more vocal in the exhibition of their dominating nature when a crisis threatens the weak and the underprivileged. The real test of humanity is taken at the toughest times of existential crisis. The mere showcase of fabricated sympathy gets shattered when it faces the real challenge from times that are challenging indeed. Reasons may be varied, however, the common guard against repression lies in striking a spirit of a rebellious rubric. In the poem “We Wear the Mask” written by African-American novelist and poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, the prime crisis of oppression of the blacks even after the success of the American Civil War acts as such a situation that can be imaginatively modified to become any situation or experience that presses down on life to extract defensive attitude clubbed with defiance. The poem highlights the difference that lies between what is felt in real and what is feigned. It criticizes the standpoint of anybody who wears the mannered mask to conceal the reality that may be harsh. Behind the pretentious cover-up lies the actuality of truth. It is like coming in

contact with a person infected with a viral disease once the mask is removed. The mask becomes a compulsion that, without the consent of the truth, shows the “grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —” (Dunbar). The false smile conceals the tears within and the happy song covers up the melancholic strain, and all such instances of falsified expressions exist because of the world that is structured to watch beauty.

Dunbar bats for the exhibition of real identity that is free from dross. Such identities manifested in individuals will be daring enough to call a spade a spade. They shall neither beguile the time nor shall live under it; they shall defy and defend at the same time getting motivated to assert the veracious continuance of their quiddity. In times that are troublesome enough to wrongfully restrain and confine, they shall not deliver palace of illusions out of their drugged brain; on the other hand, they shall move and activate their spirited selves to de-create and deconstruct the false garb and come out as inspiring superhumans.

Conclusion:

The prime focus of motivation lies in bringing transformation towards optimism. Hope and confidence are the keywords. To conclude, remembrance seeks aid from Lucille Clifton’s “new bones” that vibrantly asserts “we will wear/new bones again” (Clifton); the determination is quite clear in the lines which metaphorically convey conviction of credence. The newness in the bones is the novelty in the structure that confirms a new beginning. There shall be a voice after every challenging time. There shall be the birth of a new and fruitful day. There shall be no reliance on what others think and say. The invincible desire to live would impart true knowledge about the length and strength of our lives. In a world fighting vehemently to live against a deadly virus, the hope of wearing new bones is the only convincing course of existence.

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