

Maya Angelou: A Multi-faceted Poet

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Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

Abstract

This Paper describes, Maya Angelou as a poet of the Multi-faceted personality by dealing especially with her poetical themes. It is the lyrical witness of racism in the U.S. A phenomenal woman has just passed into history where she will illuminate its pages as she did with countless people whose lives she touched with her incandescent words in her poetry.

Keywords: Affection, afflict, bigotry, cons, facets, feminist, humanitarian, incandescent, inconstant, prostitute and suffocation.

Introduction

Maya Angelou (1928-2014), hailed as one of the best known black writers in the United States, has to her credit several volumes of poetry. These volumes address social and political issues relevant to African-Americans and challenge the validity of traditional American values and myths. Her poems are both social and confessional, in nature. She was born on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri to Bailey Johnson and Vivian Baxter Johnson. She died on 28th May, 2014 (Wednesday) at the age of 86. She lived in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In

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President Bill Clinton's inauguration, Angelou recited her poem *On the Pulse of Morning* (1993) and President Obama honoured her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest Civilian honour in 2011. Obama called her "One of the brightest lights of our time: a brilliant writer, a fierce friend and a truly phenomenal woman".

Angelou is best known for her autobiographies. She has five autobiographical works to her credit. They recapture her subjective experiences, her spiritual growth and awareness. They demonstrate, at the same time her personal experiences too. This paper only argues about her poetry.

The Poetic World of Maya Angelou

Her poetry is Political, trenchantly critical of American history. She is also a love poet and a feminist poet. Indeed, the black political writer and the woman writer cannot easily be separated. Now, let us examine all these issues by going into the study of some of her poems.

Social and Political Issues

Angelou's poetry addresses social and political issues involving the African-American and challenges the validity of traditional American values and myths. In her poem, *America* (Oh Pray my wings, Part III, Poem 3), for example, she rejects the notion that justice is available to all Americans. She refers to the problems of racism, and poverty which have affected the people. In the long history of America the gold of her promise has never been minded, the promise of justice for all has not been kept.

In her opinion, in spite of the abundance of the crops, the fruits and the grain, America has failed to feed the hungry nor eased the deep pain; all her poor citizens live below the poverty line and never have enough to feed their families. All noble protestations of ideas are swept away like the leaves on the wind.

There is racial bigotry in the South where black people are killed ruthlessly (it used to be; not anymore). At the end of the poem, the poet calls for the end of 'legends untrue' which are spread through history to entrap America's children. There is a fervent call by the poet to discard the false myths once and for all and to discover the country afresh. In another poem,

song for the old ones(Oh Pray my Wings, Part V, Poem 6), she recalls how the suffering blacks survived through the brutal humiliations of the white men.

In the poem, *And I still Rise* (1978), Angelou reveals her determination to rise above the demoralising defeat that she faces in life and to grasp life on its own terms. In spite of calculating distortion of facts about the blacks and their history, she says “She will like dust rise still”.

Quest for Love

Another significant facet of Angelou’s poetry is her constant quest ‘for love’ as a refuge against the painful social milieu. The poet records her affirmation of life and love. She is constantly in search of a man who could show concern and true love for her. In this quest for true love and affection, she had moved with several men, wine and dined with them. She was loyal and sincere in her love for the men. But they are inconstant and betrayed her, leaving her in the lurch. She expresses this and regrets in her poem *Where we Belong, a Duet* (And Still I Arise, Part I-Touch me, Life, Not Softly, Poem-5).

Fascination for Man

In all her works, including her autobiographies, her irresistible fascination for man is seen. She longed to be their beloved whenever she saw them passing by her windows. She feels that men at the beginning are gentle and tender in their love for the beloveds. But in course of time, they show their real face and cause a sense of suffocation in their women. All their beliefs about men and their love are crushed. After this bitter experience, the lady comes to know about men and their crude and coarse behaviour. Now the lady (the poet) begins to look at men who are passing by her windows without any longing for them. The mystery is dissolved. The aura of man is lost to her. The lady’s eagerness is replaced by disappointment and frustration.

Recognizing Her Cognitive Errors Relating to Men

Yet, Maya Angelou, again and again, places men on pedestals, creates rose coloured fantasies around them at a distance only to later discover her cognitive errors. One lover keeps her as his companion only till his assignment lasts at San Diego, another person cons her into prostitution and yet another man wants her to be a subservient woman. They all deserted her, smothered her sense of integrity and independence, yet Maya Angelou over-elaborates their personalities in her own mind. She does this out of her own unconscious desire for their

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unconditional love. In the poem *After* (Just Give Me a cool Drink of Water 'fore I die, Part I-Where love is a scream of Anguish, Poem 15), she speaks about the love between man and woman, which is far more tender and passionate. In recognition of their love, even the stars lean down. In the poem *To a Husband* (Just Give Me a cool Drink of Water 'fore I die, Part I-Where love is a scream of Anguish, Poem 12), the man is shown as a symbol of African strength and beauty and in his majestic presence, the wife conjures up Africa's original splendour. In this, one man, she sees the vital strength of the entire race.

Endless Chores in Woman's Daily Life

Besides dealing with love and the sufferings it causes to women, Angelou also focuses her attention on the endless cycle of chores in a woman's daily life. In her poem, *Woman Work And Still I Arise*, Part II-Travelling, poem 11), she says that a woman has got -

“the children to tend,
the clothes to mend,
the floor to mop,
the food to shop,
the chicken to fry,
the company to feed,
the garden to weed
the tots to dress
the cane to be cut
then to see about the sick
And the cotton to pick”. (Stanza I)

Thus, a woman does her routine work at home in order to feed the children and other members of the family.

In *And Still, I Rise* (1978) poem, she describes the position of women in the society. In another poem, *Phenomenal Women* (And Still I Arise, Part II-Touch me, Life, Not Softly, poem 5), she projects a hopeful determination to rise above the caged condition, highlighting the

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woman's vitality and her power to rise. By her dint of will power and achievements, she can saw men, 'Swam around me like a hive of honey bees'. A phenomenal woman is the resultant figure of both the external and inner graces. Such a woman need not bow her head, but can walk tall with quiet pride.

A Call for Recognition of the Human Failings

In *On the Pulse of Morning* (1993) poem, Angelou calls for recognition of the human failings pervading American history. She advocates a renewed nation's commitment to unity and social improvement. The poet records the malady which afflicts humanity. Thus, it is a poem of humanitarian concern.

The River describes how nations indulge in war and bring about destruction. It exhorts nations to shun war and asks them to be clad in peace. It promises to sing the songs of innocence, which God gave humanity. The whole of Nature - the rock, the river and the tree - assure that the world will be free of destruction and disillusion - which have plagued humanity.

To Conclude

Thus, Maya Angelou's poetic world contains a glimpse of themes and issues which are social, political, romantic, feministic and national and paradoxically subjective. What is found in the poetry of Maya Angelou is the lived experience of a person who travelled, opened up, took in and mentally recorded everything observed. By the time she was 40, she had been a cook, a waitress, a prostitute, a dancer, an actress, a playwright and a newspaper editor. It wasn't until later that she becomes an author with her memoir, *I know why the caged Bird sings* (1969). Set free, that caged bird soared into the literary world and enchanted millions for half a century with her poetry.

"Throughout her writings, Angelou explored the concepts of personal identity and resilience through the multifaceted lens of race, sex, family, communication and the collective past. As a whole, her work offered a clear-eyed examination of the ways in which the socially marginalising forces of racism and sexism played out at the level of the individual", says *New York Times* on her death on May 28, 2014. She once said, "My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humour and some style". She achieved exactly that and told women to look at the mirror and say, "I am a Woman/

Phenomenal Woman/ that's me". Finally Angelou suggests the possibility of a fruitful adaptation, which may enrich not only the American tradition, but ultimately the capacities of poetry in English as a whole.

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