

The Black Tales: Stories of the Struggle of African Americans in the Poetry of Maya Angelou

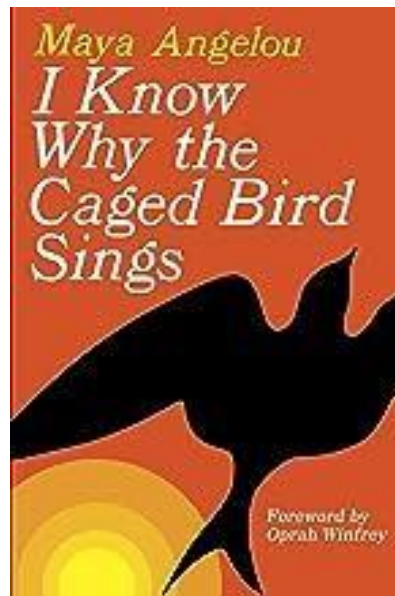
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Abstract

Although Maya Angelou is an American by her nationality, her craftsmanship in poetry writing makes her a global citizen. The simple yet thoughtful subject matters of her poetry, selection of lucid language, toning down the burning issues of the modern world etc. appeal literary lovers across the world to read her poetry. The present researcher makes an effort to

recount the untold stories of the lives of African Americans: the dark past, unstable present and surviving skills in an unhealthy social setup.

Keywords: Maya Angelou, African Americans, black narrative, American literature, social hegemony, racial discrimination.

1. Introduction

A born artist in true sense Maya Angelou was a master of whatever form of art she engaged herself with. She was equally successful as a dancer, singer, actor and film director, but she scaled the summit of popularity as a poet. Her rise as a successful poet was not a straightforward journey however. Everything that she owned in her life came as a token of hard-fought battle against unhealthy circumstances. Angelou grew up with her maternal grandmother after the separation of her parents. She fell prey to sexual assault by her mother's lover at a tender age of eight. At that point of time, she was not able to understand how uneven the society she belonged to was. She could not even rationalise why the culprit was sent behind the bar and eventually killed later on. It led the little girl Maya to forget to speak for six long years. However, resembling the proverb, "better late than never" Angelou realised the hardships of life that she had left behind.

All those traumatic experiences got their due expression in her verse. Her poems are not mere form art, they are rather a medium to retrospect the dark past, inspect the unstable present and establish future prospects of the lives of African Americans. Angelou attempts to tell hundreds of untold stories which the Black people dislike to live over again. This article promises to offer a collective tale of the sufferings of the African Americans as projected by the poet in her verses.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section, namely, Introduction spells out a brief introduction of the poet viz. Maya Angelou. The section also mentions common subject matters that the poet deals with in most of her poems. The following section discusses the struggle of African Americans and how they rise up against racial discrimination in Maya Angelou's poetry. The findings of the research have been supported with the textual references

from six poems from different collections by the poet. The third section winds up the paper by highlighting the major findings.

2. Discussion

If poetry can be used as a mechanism to appeal for the changes in society, Maya Angelou is a quintessential ambassador of it. She composes poetry not only to flex her ineffable artistic quality or to come under the limelight of popularity, but to pave a strong base for raising voice for the rights of her fellow African Americans. Her poems have been a century old almanac of the struggle of the Black community in America. Almost each of her poems is an arrow for the society which has been dominated by the Whites since centuries, neglecting the sheer existence of the Blacks. Through her poems, Angelou speaks her heart out in response to all the ignorance and down-looks of society. In the poem *The Caged Bird* she presents the perimeter of life of the Black people in America through the comparison with a bird inside the cage. The metaphor captures the overwhelming agony and cruelty upon the Blacks which indeed, is relatable to the emotional suffering of the caged bird. A bird inside the cage can do nothing but ‘stalks down his narrow cage’ which perfectly represents the Black people’s life in America. Angelou write:

*“But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.”*

(The Caged Bird)

According to the poet, although discrimination and racism have made up the cage for the Black people, it could not stop them from dreaming. Every Black soul in America including the poet herself share a collective dream of achieving freedom from the oppression of the Whites. Just like the caged bird sings to be freed, the African Americans too raise their voice to achieve their right. Angelou pledges that despite having experienced ‘nightmare’ in the past and standing on the grave of dreams at present, they shall continue their cry for freedom. To quote her:

*“But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.”*

(The Caged Bird)

Angelou accepts the fact that the goal that they fight for freedom is not easy. It is rather ‘fearful’ to raise their voice against the dominating community and hence their voice mostly remains unheard. She makes another confession in the poem that even though the oppressed people are fighting for their dream, they have never experienced the taste of freedom. However, they would not cease their voice until they get hold of the far-fetched dream of ‘things unknown’ because this is what they have been ‘longed for’ centuries. In her words:

*“The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.”*

(The Caged Bird)

In the poem *When I Think about Myself* too Angelou captures the harsh reality of lives of Black people in America. The poet brilliantly presents a pen-picture as to how the African Americans are treated by the Whites. The speaker of the poem who is a sixty-years-old Black lady works as a caretaker of a little White girl. The latter ironically addresses the old lady as ‘girl’ whereas she has to call her ‘ma’am’ in response. Through the speaker’s experience the poet makes an attempt to represent the amount of humiliation and ignorance that the Black people need to go through in order to earn their end meet. The poet understands the compulsion of her people and hence advises them to not react to the self-glorifying attitude of the Whites. This is because there is no other means for them to earn their bread. So, she prefers to ignore it with laughter instead like the speaker does. In her words:

*“Sixty years in these folks’ world
The child I works for calls me girl
I say ‘yes ma’am’ for working’s sake.
Too proud to bend
Too poor to break’
I laugh until my stomach ache,
When I think about myself.”*

(When I Think about Myself)

Angelou’s brilliance is not confined to capturing the Black people’s humiliation. It is the use of lucid language that has euphemised the harsh reality of the issue. The life of her people which is filled with the spices of ‘death’ and ‘choke’ are compensated for by the use of words like ‘laugh’. However, the softness of her language brings out a bold message about the naked picture of White dominated society. In her language:

*“When I think about myself”
I almost laugh myself to death,
My life has been one great big joke,
A dance that’s walked
A song that’s spoke,
I laugh so hard I almost choke
When I think about myself.”*

(When I Think about Myself)

Angelou engages herself with the burning issue of distasteful racial discrimination in another fine poem of her **“Harlem Hopscotch”**. She uses a popular children’s game hopscotch as an extended metaphor for exploring how painful it is to grow up as a Black and poor in America. In the poem the speaker is seen to be giving directions to the ‘Black’ children about the tactics of the game of hopscotch. However, the speaker’s direction is beyond the ‘rules’ of the game. It is rather an advice for the Black people for surviving in the White dominated society. The imagery of a hopscotch court perhaps symbolises the lives of African Americans: the boxes and lines of a hopscotch court seem to represent the restrictions that are put before the Blacks in the society. For them, surviving in society without crossing the lines of restrictions resembles playing a life-long game of playing hopscotch. The speaker dictates:

“One foot down, then hop! It’s hot.

Good things for the one that's got.

Another jump, now to the left.

Everybody for hisself."

(Harlem Hopscotch)

The poem is a reminder for the Blacks as to how challenging it is to survive in an unwelcoming world. The game of hopscotch indicates life of the African Americans in the sense that one has to be attentive and focused all his or her life as is required to win the game. There is no time for them to take rest since a Black in America seems to have born with the burden of responsibilities to fight against the adversities of life. According to the speaker, all the good things in the modern world is for the rich people, whereas for the underprivileged section, it is like a hopping and jumping in a hopscotch court which is drawn on hot patch of land. Poor people like the African Americans are abided by the circumstances of life for moving around in search of basic requirements such as food, house rent etc. Once they stop moving for work, the game of life will be all over. Thus the speaker warns her fellow Black men not 'stick around' at a place. To quote Angelou:

"In the air, now both feet down.

Since you black, don't stick around.

Food is gone, the rent is due,

Curse and cry and then jump two."

(Harlem Hopscotch)

Division within a society is an unhealthy sign in the progress of the society, and a nation to an extent. In order to grow as a nation, it is essential to include people belonging to each section or class. Working on nation building without acknowledging the value of its citizens is mere stupidity, incomplete and injustice on the viewpoint of humanitarian value. This is the grey area where a powerful nation like America fails to stand as an exemplary union of states. The nation, from the poet's perspective, is the one in which a section of the citizens has locked themselves inside the 'whitened castles' which is safeguarded with 'deep and poisoned moats' and another section by contrast, is dwelling outside the castle. These metaphors used in the poem *These Yet to Be United States* symbolise the barbed wire between the 'Whites' and 'Blacks'. Thus, Angelou is of the thought that despite its growth as a nation in terms of political and military power, the modern United States of America is yet to be united as a socially inclusive nation. An ideal United States stands true iff it is able to give emphasis on the development of its human resource and

considers the contribution of each section of its citizens as an essential part in the process of nation building. In this sense, the states of America are yet to be united. The poet says:

*“You dwell in whitened castles
with deep and poisoned moats
and cannot hear the curses
which fill your children’s throats.”*

(These Yet to Be United States)

Where there is a split in the society a group which is devoid of power always becomes the prey to the horror of discrimination. It is not an exception in the case of African Americans too. They have always been at the receiving end of negligence of the Whites. The poet herself being a victim of racial discrimination, challenges all the ill-treatment of the Whites in the poem *Still I Rise*. It is her voice of resilience in this poem that represents the attitude that every suppressed person should adopt and stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of dominating class. She makes an announcement that there is nothing that can hold her back. Her life-long experience of slavery has made her mentally so strong that she has now developed the mental strength to rise up from the lowest and darkest of circumstances. She says:

*“You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise.”*

(Still I Rise)

Angelou takes a dig at the Whites’ attitude towards the Blacks. She thinks that the former cannot digest the simple yet easy-going lifestyle of the Blacks. They are zealous of the Black people’s happiness with every little thing in their life. The poet does not like to let this attitude go unnoticed. She throws the arrows of question to the Whites on this issue.

*“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)

The poet knows the answers to answers to her questions. She knows that it is too hard for the White people to see the African Americans appear happy against the adversities of life. Their happiness offends the Whites ‘Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines/ Digging in my backyard’. The source of their mental resilience, according to the poet, is their own spirit and the history of long struggle against the oppression of racial hegemony. Thus, the poet herself becomes the flagbearer of this spirit and leads the way to raise their voice against racial discrimination. They possess the spirit to rise up leaving behind the dark past of ‘terror and fear’. Angelou voices out:

“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.”

(Still I Rise)

The struggle of African American is not a new revolution. The root of their fight against racial discrimination can be traced back to centuries. They have been making ceaseless efforts to uplift themselves and to socially equalise with the Whites. They have improved themselves in every field and raised their voice to get recognition for their efforts. However, the lens through which society looks at them only produced the ‘dim’ vision of them. All their efforts consequently have produced no fruit, and their voices have gone unheard as usual. Despite being at the receiving end of the repeated rejection and ignorance over time, their struggle for existential identity continues without any halt. There is no force which can dishearten them from raising appeal for right. Angelou herself takes the lead to outcry for their hard-fought dream.

“Take the blinders from your vision,

take the padding from your ears,

*and confess you've heard me crying,
and admit you've seen my tears.”*

(Equality)

The poet is of the opinion that it is society and its point of view which needs to be changed to bring the 'equality'. African Americans have had experience of the 'shameful past'. They have overcome 'a painful history' of racial hegemony. However, at their level, they have been making ceaseless progress and have kept on 'marching forward' towards the betterment of life. On the contrary, the White dominated society, addressed as 'you' in the poem, does take the regressive move and as always 'keep on coming last' in the race of intellectual progress. As a result, the sense of freedom and equality which the Black people fight for has been put on delay for centuries. Angelou states:

*“We have lived a painful history,
we know the shameful past,
but I keep on marching forward,
and you keep on coming last.”*

(Equality)

Maya Angelou's poem ***Equality*** is a sort of memorandum which represents the demand of African Americans. The poet herself being the metaphor for the entire Black community boldly articulates the most sought after thing i.e. 'Equality'. She has to say that everything that the Black people ask for is the status of 'equality' in the society. Once they achieve it, they will be free from all the obstacles and shortcomings of life. More importantly, they will forget the dark and painful past which still haunts them every moment in their life. The poet cries:

*“Equality, and I will be free.
Equality, and I will be free.”*

(Equality)

3. Conclusion

If literature is said to be the mirror of society, the literary creations of Maya Angelou bear out as evidence. The statement stands to logic as most of her poetry produces the reflection of the world around her. Growing up in an inhospitable social set up to being sexually by her mother's lover she has come across the dark passage of racial discrimination. All those personal experience and the sufferings of her fellow Black people set up the background of her poetry.

Considering the above discussions, the present study can be wind up with the note that Angelou is successful in narrating the untold stories of the Black people’s life in America. At the same time, she uses poetry as a weapon to reply to the oppressors as well as a medium of preaching awareness about racial discrimination and to fight against it.

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