



Afro-American Feminism in Maya Angelou's Poems: A Study of "Caged Bird" and "Phenomenal Woman"

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Abstract— Towards the late 60's and into the 70's, African American literature became focused, more and more, on asserting an Afro centric identity and renewing links with African culture and sensibility. Alongside there was a great surge in Black Women's writing with a number of black women insisting on being heard and taken seriously not only in the mainstream, but also within the black community. Maya Angelou represents the black woman of the 1960's. She has found the place to reinvent the self, a site many other woman writers had been searching for. Her choice of writing is an endeavor to reconcile her fragmented split self, with racial and gender politics. The theme that remains consistent in her works is her struggle, as a black woman, to maintain her sense of individuality amid the unrelenting forces with its racist and sexist ideology. Angelou uses her writing as a tool for resisting and altering those ideologies, hegemonies and methodologies that have silenced and marginalized black women. This paper is an attempt to analyze discrimination towards black women which appears in Maya Angelou's poems. The analysis will be based on the select poem of Angelou which include "Caged Bird" and "Phenomenal woman".

Keywords— *Feminism, Race, Domination, Patriarchy, Intersectionality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of sexism and racial discrimination has always been apparent in the American society. Traditionally men have seen women as the weaker gender and thus matters were addressed through sexist views. "Gender inequality in class society results from a historically specific tendency to ideologically 'naturalize' prevailing socio-economic inequalities" (Stolcke19). This relates the conventional feminist version of gender, aptly stated by Simon de Beauvoir that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (301). Furthermore, Lewontin whose definition we would like to follow, stresses the significance of the socialization process: the growth of gender identity "depends on what label was attached to him or her as a child... Thus biological differences became a signal for, rather than a cause of, differentiation in social roles"(142). This definition associates in a brilliant way the influence of societal customs and appraisals, power

structures and the role of socialization. Along the history of black women movement in United States, black women were put on the last rank of social class, after Afro-American men. Black women being discriminated against every aspect of life not only resist the discrimination of men, but also for racism (Myrdal, 1944, 60).The nineteenth century was the time when black women chose writing to speak up against the race and gender oppression black women have experienced. The strong desire of these black women writers was to express themselves on their own terms and also to resolve the conflicts between their conventional images as constructed by the world outside and their real selves. Therefore, race and gender became the two major concerns of black women writings in the 1970, considerably contributing to the development of Afro-American literature. The strong desire of these black women writers was to express themselves and to resolve the conflicts between their stereotypical images as

fabricated by the world outside and their real selves. They no longer wanted to listen to and yield to the pressure constructed within the community to let go of their female issues in order not to jeopardize the black struggle for identity. As Ajuan Maria Mance Rightly states "writing both as African American and as women, Black Women poets of the late twentieth century renegotiated those assumptions about identity that understand anti-racist action and thought in terms of the interest of African American males" (123). Playing second fiddle was not tolerable to many Afro-American women writers including Maya Angelou, and they instead chose to write in order to express specific women issues and an acute sense of marginalization which they faced on a day to day basis. As Jaspreet Kaur Bhangua rightly says, "Revolt against the essentially male patriarchal nature of black nationalistic ideologies, these writers represented a community of women who strongly objected to both the exclusion of black women from the black political movement and the pressure to sacrifice gender issues for racial concerns" (118). Black women's writing thus raised their objection to double marginalization experienced by black women.

It was also experienced by Maya Angelou who was born as a black woman, as shown through her poems. Angelou has been related to "a songless bird", who "gives up all singing, all sound during the five years that follow her rape. For five years she is mute, locked in a speechless body, as she has willed it" (Lupton 67). This strong sense of imprisonment is expressed in the poem "Caged Bird" which Angelou takes from Paul Lawrence Dunbar's 1896 poem, "Sympathy",

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep
core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings-
I know why the caged bird sings. (15-21)

Just as the bruised bird in Dunbar's poem, appeals God so that he might be free, Angelou mentions the possibility of her tune being perceived as far as "the distant hill",

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. (15-22)

Angelou returned to Stamps during this self-imposed silence, where her grandmother acquainted her to the beautiful and educated Mrs. Flowers. After Mrs. Flowers helped her release her voice, Angelou was liberated from her "caged" silence. Listening to Mrs. Flowers read aloud, Angelou defined the woman's voice as singing: "Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 84) Angelou has admired "the black aristocrat Bertha Flowers for her ability to act, with the most beautiful of black skins, in a manner Angelou had thought possible only for a white person" (Bloom 45). Flower's teaching in literature and patience opened Angelou's eyes to the understanding that "mastery of language and pride in self are not limited to those of light skin" (Bloom 45). The introduction to Mrs. Flowers is considered important since it not only assisted Angelou to come out of her silence but it also taught her to grow as an individual. Thus, like a "caged bird" opening its throat to sing, Angelou is able to control and find her voice again. "Bear in mind," Mrs. Flowers tells Angelou, "language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals... Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning" (Bloom 82).

Angelou published her autobiography entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1969 and the poem "Caged Bird" was in that autobiography however was not published at that time. It was published in 1983 in the era of Woman Liberation Movement. This poem is about the black race being held back from freedom for their skin color. The poem "Caged Bird" not only focused on the black woman but represented the oppression and segregation towards black people. Throughout history, obstructions have been put up between races. Partitions and discriminations between blacks and whites have happened since ancient times. For more than three hundred years, an illegal tradition of slavery and discernment has existed.

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
(Caged Bird, 5th stanza)

This stanza exemplifies the attitude black people experienced during discrimination. During this biased era, blacks were in a state of subjugation due to the stolen opportunities and the hatred they often come across. The last line indicated that the black people realized that it was necessary to have a voice and finally sing for their freedom. This continuing black inferiority and white supremacy was bound in tradition and hard to dissolve. The poem supposes that the feasible answer would be a white person, as blacks are "caged" by their color. Moreover, opportunities enormously existed for whites, whereas the same was wrong for blacks.

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.
(Caged Bird, 3rd and 6th stanza)

The above stanza was the third and last stanza of the poem. This stanza clearly revealed the true meaning of the poem and defined actions of a "caged bird." The blackness of skin acted as an obstacle for the black race as it restricted the freedom for a person. The white person's freedom and feelings were strange to the one who was black. In this poem, Angelou as one of the black woman expressed her voice that black people would be free. Her belief for freedom and equality was beginning to spread among the black race and she "sings" for freedom. Although Mrs. Flowers laid the foundation for her appreciation of the poetic word, however, it was her mother Vivian Baxter who gave Angelou the desired push into womanhood and maturity. Angelou not only adored her mother's beauty but also respected the way her mother carried herself in society. Vivian Baxter imparted in Angelou the values that were both feminine and strong.

The "phenomenal woman" according to Angelou, "should be tough, tender, laugh as much as possible, and the... woman warrior whois armed with wit and courage will be among the first to celebrate victory" (Would't Take Nothing For My Journey, 7). While debating over women's strength and courage, Maxine Hong Kingston's well known novel *The Woman Warrior* takes up this image. Kingston writes about her childhood ambitions to become a "woman warrior". However, in the text, she prospers and ultimately becomes a military leader whose "female" "interruptions such as menstruation and pregnancy enriches her rather than inhibits her skills, (qtd.

in Whitson 11). Hence, Angelou and Kingston are not different as they both lay stress on the significance of individuality and freedom for the "woman warrior". Angelou's poetry emphasizes the courage, fearlessness, strength and often the creative and determined spirit of the "phenomenal woman". It is this very courage and strength of her character that promises her of being a "phenomenally, phenomenal woman". Thus in "Phenomenal Woman", Angelou sings aloud:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size

But when I start to tell them,

They think I'm telling lies.

I say,

It's in the reach of my arms,

The span of my hips

The stride of my step,

The curl of my lips.

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me

I walk into a room

Just as cool as you please,

And to a man,

The fellows stand or

Fall down on their knees.

Then they swarm around me,

A hive of honey bees.

I say,

It's the fire in my eyes,

And the flash of my teeth,

The swing in my waist,

And the joy in my feet.

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me. (1-29)

While discussing the role of the "phenomenal woman", Angelou interlaces other images of exploitations with this image, which have been tolerated by the Afro-American woman throughout history. A year earlier the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* a wave of

feminism began to flow in America called the New Women's Movement. (Lupton 70) This renewal of feminism was grateful to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s with its grassroots request for social change. Angelou appeared on the literary scene when Afro-American women had started small discussion groups to share their experiences of domination under the patriarchal order. Angelou also worked with the women group of the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH). The autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the poem "Caged Bird" confirm that the image of the "caged bird" has definite application to women. The image in itself centers on strong women characters particularly the women who assisted her in her journey through young adulthood. However, Angelou's support for the feminist cause has been ambivalent. She stresses that Afro-American women are more independent than white women. Moreover, she believes in equal pay, equal respect and equal accountability for one and all and goes on to elucidate "I am a feminist. I've been female for a long time now. I'd be stupid not to be on my own side". (Lupton 71)

Therefore, being on her own side, the 'caged bird' is a significant aspect of the "phenomenal woman", who speaks of oppression and yet sings of hopefulness, and who has preferred to face truth and not permit herself to be intimidated by it. Angelou continually felt caged; for she was incapable to get away from the "homemade" dresses she must wear to church, incapable to escape "the reality of her blackness... and by her limited opportunities in a segregated school system. She was trapped, too, by the bigotry of Stamps, whose town fathers demanded that she and all African-Americans live in only one section of town and attend only those schools in their part of town" (Lupton 66). The "caged bird" is a symbol for the shackled slave, who tries to endure by singing the "blues",

The blues may be the life you've led
Or midnight hours in
An empty bed. But persecuting
Blues I've known
Could stalk
Like tigers, break like bone,

Maya Angelou as the poet and the speaker in this poem defined a woman as great with high confidence. As the reader could perceive in every line of this poem that Maya was so proud of herself because she always said that she was a "phenomenal woman".

I'm a woman
Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

(Phenomenal Woman, 3rd stanza)

Most often the word is defined as extraordinary and impressive, and Angelou was definitely rejoicing in being an astonishing and impressive woman. In every stanza, she is exhibiting that she was always proud of her body. Angelou addressed this poem to those women and men who thought that being beautiful meant having thin body, thin lips, and small hips.

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's

(Phenomenal Woman, 1st stanza)

In those lines, Maya Angelou stresses upon the fact that she is not beautiful like a model, yet she can be confident, tough, and courageous. Her knowledge and appearance illustrates that she is confident and it is the power and confidence that makes her phenomenal. Maya Angelou also expresses how the society, men and history perceive her as the black race. It is expressed in the third stanza:

Men themselves have wondered

What they see in me.

They try so much

But they can't touch

My inner mystery.

(Phenomenal Woman, 3rd stanza)

These lines revealed that men never really understand that why some black women are so confident to take such drastic action. Since majority of black women did not take any action to challenge the inequality it was hard to believe only one woman would take such action. Angelou also attempts to reveal her inner beauty by caring for each other as a woman and mother:

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, 4th stanza)

Angelou illustrates that as a woman she has a positive side. In the line "It's in the click of my heels", Angelou desired to show her confidence as a woman. In the meantime in line "The palm of my hand" showed her care for others. From the whole poem the researcher concluded that being a phenomenal woman is not defined by the beautiful face or by looking good, but it was about how a woman develops the confidence and become proud of herself.

CONCLUSION

Maya Angelou is one of the black writers who could support herself by her writing and is famous for her portrayal of Black life. Black women not just oppressed by men of white race but by the black men as well. They were victims of many other intersectional factors including race, gender and class. Angelou is acclaimed worldwide for her ability to express what was vital to millions of black people especially black woman. She uses her works to show the concern about race and gender. In the poem "Phenomenal Woman", Angelou exhibited the idea that real beauty is not determined by the face or looks but by the confidence and courage a woman has. The last, in poem "Caged Bird", Angelou revealed that black women particularly are under development because of the tradition. She was as the black woman who expressed her idea that black people will be free.

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