

A Struggle for Black Identity in Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise*

Abstract

Maya Angelou is an African American poetess (1928-2014) who always wrote for the problems of black community throughout the world. Her poems deal with the universal appeal of liberty, equality, brotherhood and justice. '*Still I Rise*' is one of her most famous poem, written in her third volume of poetry called 'And Still I Rise' published in 1978. The message is about the resiliency, strength and beauty that black communities continue to show through hundreds of years of oppression and discrimination. This paper presents a struggle of a black person for his identity even after the oppression of hundreds of years by white masters in American Society. The humanity is in the centre of the poem that's why the poem become a piece of universal appeal.

Keywords: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Universal, Black Community, White Community, Oppression, African American, Oppressor, Oppressed, Liberation, Aadmi Nama.

Introduction

*Yaa aadmi hi lalo Jawahar hai bay baha.
Aur Aadmi hi Khak se badtar hai ho gaya
Kala bhi aadmi hai ki ulta hai ju taba
Gora bhi aadmi hai ki tukda sa chand ka
Budshakal, Budnumaa hai so hai vah bhi aadmi.*

(The man is gemstone itself. And the man himself has become worse than the man. Black is also the man just like skillet on its back. Blonde is also a man, lovely just like the moon And one who is ugly and awful is also a man.)

From Aadmi Nama by Nazir Akbarabadi

These are well known lines written in 18th century in Agra, in Urdu Language which keep the man in centre with out any discrimination of colour and creed, but inspite of many of this type of universal appeal the vices in human society appeared in different forms. It appeared in the form of colour, creed, caste, religion, region and nationality. It divided men into many groups which became a great challenge before the world organisations to unit men as the man. This type of discrimination can be benefited to a particular group of men but very harmful to another group. On the contrary since the ages the literature in many languages is filling this gap between man and literature. Sometime this gap is peacefully maintained and sometimes it become revolutionary.

The present poem is a revolutionary one which demands the equal rights for black people especially the black women in which a black woman decides to break the iron made slavery by her firm determination. This beautiful poem is an bitter experience of an African American poet Maya Angelou (1928-2014). The opening word of the poem is important this shows that the poem is being addressed to some others which clearly addressed to the white masters of black community. The poem thus becomes political as well as personal lyric. The poet is speaking about the oppression and discrimination of centuries by white people. The expression is in such a way that the people feel sympathy to the blacks.

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter twisted lies.²*

The poem itself is also a direct response to this type of oppressive writing. The poet changes writing, as the writing is the most powerful weapon for change. The poem does not begin by emphasizing physical subjugation or literal violence. Instead it begins by emphasizing the ways the wrong kinds of writing can imprison the minds of both white and the black. First and foremost, those who would help in liberating blacks must first liberate their mindsets and challenge the thinking of their masters.



Navratan Singh

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
MG Kashi Vidhyapith,
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

It is only the third line of the poem which indicates the physical oppression *You may trod me in the very dirt* but the phrase here seems more metaphorical rather than literal. Metaphorically to tread another person into the dirt is to treat that person with enormous dishonour and horrifying violence. The poet immediately responds to that disrespect and violence:-

But still, like dust, I will rise

The poet uses the word dust effectively because dust is a thing which can not be destroyed as it survives like the dust again. In the next stanza the speaker asks a question from the oppressor as well as from oppressed. The speaker asks the Oppressors why are they unhappy if she is rising against the harsh oppression of slavery. She on the other hand sympathises and energises the oppressed that they need not to be gloom if she is rising against the oil wells. She questions why her sassiness seems to make her oppressors more miserable and tells them that she: has a joy inside her that would suggest unlimited potential and a bright future as if she had an oil well in her living room which would guarantee these things.

Does your sassiness up set you?

Why are you beset with gloom?

'Cause I walk like I have got oil wells,

Pumping in my living room.

The next lines of the poem present movement to equality as something is going to take place. In some ways it takes some of the combativeness out of the poem, the tide is not going to stop for anyone whatever effort they might make, the sun and the moon still rise and set according to the tides, not according to the desire of men. By comparing the movement towards equality and demanding that the wrongs of the history be left in the past be seen as inevitable as the tides. The poet removed the conflict from the poem and from the situation she is writing about, advising her oppressors that their efforts to tie her to history are futile.

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides

Just like hopes springing high

Still I rise.

The poet has decided not to succumb any more against the inhuman system of slavery and color discrimination. She does not want to be weak because to be weak is miserable. She is resilient. She decides that she no longer will accept racism, misogyny or any fewer rights but equality.

Do you want to see me broken,

Bowed head and lowered eyes

Shoulders falling down like teardrops

Weaken by my soulful cries.

The self respect and confidence of the poet is reflected in the next stanza. Her spirit of revolt against the oppression has decided to move forward.

Does my haughtiness offend you?

Don't you take it awful hard

'Cause I laugh like I have got gold mines

Digging in my own backyard.

The courage and determination to break the iron chains of slavery is cited here in this next stanza

when the poet does not have the fear of bullet, sword, harsh arguments hate and prejudices. She wants to rise with bold intentions.

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 will rise.

The boldness and the harshness of poet's ideas are reflected in the following stanza because she is a woman and also shows the conflict within her male oppressors who find her very attractive by are angry about this, and turn their anger towards her instead. This is the first stanza where she is not presenting herself as an African American person but as a sexy black woman. The reference to the "diamonds at the meeting of my thighs" is the only overtly sexual reference in the poem. As the stanza reveals:

Does my sexism upset you?

Does it come as a surprise

That I dance like I, ve got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs ?

The next stanza is a declaration of a move towards the future and is also the most direct reference to the slavery of the past that has been intimated earlier but never clearly stated. "History shame" references slavery and the way in which history casts shame on those, who participated in it. The term also explains why her contemporaries are trying to rewrite history in order to hide some of the events. The past rooted in pain references, the abuses carried out and the pain caused by segregation The poet compares herself with ocean with its power that is not easily over come but also refers to the entire African American community as the black ocean that is moving forward with power and might. As the lines express :

Out of huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that rooted in pain

I rise

I am a black ocean, leaping and wide

Welling and swelling, I bear in the tide.

In the end of the poem the poetess represents herself as a representative to the black community. She becomes the only hope of change to them. She represents herself as the dreams and hopes to the entire black community in the world. She also appreciates the contribution of her ancestors to this movement against the very long period of slavery. She chooses to be a free woman at all. She declares herself as immortal as the dust. As she says.

Leaving behind rights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a day break that wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave

I am the dream and the hope of slaves,

I rise

I rise

I rise

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to highlight the struggle of black community against the tyranny of

white masters in America. This also aims to show their determination to fight against the social evil.

Conclusion

Therefore the poem is not just for the black women but for every body. Not only for me and you but for all together. The poet wants a fairness not in the skin but in the mind and heart where each of us stands equally well. This movement of literature is for social justice for everyone of us. These should not be any discrimination on the basis of caste color, race creed, religion, region and nationalities. This poem was sung by Nelson Mandela at his inauguration in 1994 having spent 27 years in prison. It is as valuable even today as it was in 1994. A documentary has also been made on 'And Still I Rise' to immortalize Angelou's genius about which Nick Allen writes in his review of the film that, " it a new documentary about his creative genius. It is more of a fleeting introduction to her work.³

Therefore Maya Angelou establishes an importance that spread to other areas, like political activism, which led her to friendship with Malcom X and Martin Luthor King among many other. *Still I Rise* provides and in depth picture of how prolific she was. The connections that led from one artistic opportunity to the next and strong example to how those she

interacted which influenced her work. She is such a woman who gave a voice to numerous communities, while helping the life of black women become more visible on a cultural scale. Being influence by her creative power, a famous poet Robert Frost said that *I knew she would make an impression. She was big and had the voice of God.*

Endnotes

1. Akbarabadi Nazir- Kavita Kosh, Uttar Pradesh Hindi
2. Institute, Mahatma Gandhi Marg Lucknow
3. 1992, Ed by Nazir Mohammad.
4. Angelou Maya: *And Still I Rise*, penguin, Random House LLC. 1978.
5. Roger Ebert : *Movie Review of And Still I Rise*, Sept. 16. 2016, rogerebert.com.
6. Angelou Maya: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*'Random House 1969.
7. Angelou Maya : *I Shall Not Be Moved* Random House 1990.
8. Witmer, Donna M, " Robert Frost and Maya Angelou: Poet-as-Rhetor in the Presidential Inauguration: Textual Symbols and the Symbol of Enactment (1994) Masters Thesis 2223.
9. <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/thesis/2123>