

Contesting Larger Structures: A Close Reading of Selected Poems of Maya Angelou

Abstract

Maya Angelou has always been revered as a black woman poet for her frank criticism of the prejudices against her race and community. At the same time she also questioned the internal problems of her own community. But her concerns are not confined to the issues of race and gender alone. She sees gender implicated in the larger structures of history, economy and White epistemology. Though her criticism of these larger frameworks is not very obvious in her poems, a close scrutiny would suggest that in subtle ways she has challenged these conceptual categories.

This paper aims to study her opinion on the intersections of gender, race, history, capitalism and White epistemology.

Keywords: Gender, Race, History, Memory, Capitalism, Knowledge, Epistemology.

Introduction

Though widely recognized as an American author, Maya Angelou has triumphantly retained her distinctness by rooting her works in her own history, culture and literary traditions. Besides being a literary figure, she also has had an extensive career as a screenwriter, actress, dancer and civil rights activist. The diversity of her talents is manifested in the heterogeneity of her works. Written in unconventional forms, her texts display an affinity for experimentation and a search for exploring innovative ways of expression.

Angelou was well aware of the racial and gender issues of her times and spoke vehemently against them. She, at the same time, was not blind to the internal tensions and the hierarchical oppression within her own racial community. Through her poems she made a conscious attempt to voice her concerns. Catherine A. Dobris in her article 'Maya Angelou: Writing the "Black Voice" for the Multicultural Community' analyses Angelou as a feminist poet who was actively involved in the constructing positive representations of black womanhood. In the book titled *Maya Angelou: Poet*, author Vicki Cox undertakes a study of Maya Angelou primarily in the context of race and gender. In one of her interviews with Maya Angelou titled 'Maya Angelou: Telling the Truth, Eloquently', Audrey T. McCluskey focuses on her experiences as an African American writer.

But to confine her themes to the issues of race and gender is to undermine the scope of her poetry. She saw the problems of gender as strongly implicated in the discursive frameworks of history, capitalism and epistemology. Through an attentive reading of her poems, this paper aims to show her confrontation with and defiance of the White metanarratives of history, knowledge and capitalism.

The four poems published in her poetry collection *Phenomenal Woman: four poems celebrating women* not only celebrate black womanhood but also present a critique of the discourses which control and subjugate women.

Aim of the Study

This article is an attempt to read her poems closely with a view to examining her poetic engagement with the issues facing black woman as well as her understanding of the larger structures within which gender operates. The four poems under consideration are 'Phenomenal Woman', 'Still I Rise', 'Weekend Glory' and 'Our Grandmothers'.

History and Memory

Angelou's poems constantly remind the readers that history has been functional in the oppression of women. In order to change the present the past has to be revisited and reinterpreted. In the poem "Still I Rise" she

Pragyan Padmaja Behera

Assistant Professor,
Deptt.of English,
Jain University,
Bangalore

frankly admits that she lacks the agency of writing her own history. She points out:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies

The "you" in the above quoted line could either be the Whites or Men. She also makes an oblique reference to two other important things here – the practice of writing and process of writing history. Neither writing nor history are neutral. Both are ideologically charged categories. History for her is a set of "bitter, twisted lies" – an indiscriminate concoction of fact and fiction which is always open for manipulation by authoritative power. Writing is about representation and thereby becomes an act of asserting power. Anything that is written has the privilege to assume the status of truth. Thus when the past is written down in the form of history it gets fixed as truth. It is this fixity which Angelou questions in her poems. Therefore the act of rising like "air" is significant. It suggests an uncontrollable movement against the fixity of historical truths. History also is his/tory. Black women hardly had the opportunity to write their history. They are neither the authors nor characters of historical narratives. Maya Angelou seeks to revive the stories of these women and their lives through her poems.

Developing the same idea, a little later in the poem, she says:

You may shoot me with your words, ('Still I Rise')

The act of shooting conjures up a violent image of destruction. The instruments here being words which are lethal in nature. She suggests that history in the written form has destroyed the black race and women by erasing their presence and stiling their representations in it. Proceeding further Angelou uses a complex metaphor to elaborate her idea of history:

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise. ('Still I Rise')

This metaphor can be interpreted in multiple ways. One way in which it can be understood is that it evokes the idea of home, protection and care. In other words, history has sheltered, nurtured and validated the practices of discrimination based on gender and race. From a past that is "rooted in pain" and is like "nights of terror" she wishes to rise. Another way in which the metaphor can be interpreted is to see huts as first marks of civilized life. History being a marker of civilization, it is quite ironic, that right from the beginning of civilization it has harboured such barbaric ideas of suppression and discrimination.

In the poem 'Our Grandmothers', Angelou tries to create an alternative history. In a patriarchal set up where a family and community's history and ancestry are traced through forefathers, Angelou attempts to chart a different trajectory by tracing a history of the women who have preceded her. The protagonist in the poem is an anonymous "She". But this "She" stands for all the women who have fought bravely to save their families from White atrocities. The woman in the poem is most probably a slave on the run from her White masters. Angelou is quite realistic in her description of these women. Though

she does not depict them as victorious freedom fighters, she portrays them as women who never gave up. The first stanza presents the woman as an animal being hunted. Though she knows no means to fight back, she never yields either. The repetition of the lines – "I shall not be moved"- is indicative of that undying spirit of resilience. It is this spirit which has been transferred from one generation of black women to another and has left its indelible marks in their lives. It is this spirit which is visible in the lives of the black women even today when they have to make difficult choices:

She stands before the abortion clinic, confounded by the lack of choices. In the Welfare line, reduced to the pity of handouts. Ordained in the pulpit, shielded by the mysteries. ('Our Grandmothers')

One meaningful argument the poem makes is that even black history to a large extent acknowledges the contribution of men. Maya Angelou contends that these unnamed women in their own insignificant ways have also contributed to the protection and development of the black race. Hence they are also as important as a Martin Luther King or a DuBois. She compares these women to other historically significant female figures like the Biblical Sheba and the ancient Syrian queen Zenobia. The black grandmothers, even though unknown were as strong as these historical figures. But they do not figure prominently in history because of prejudice. Instead history has constantly sustained negative images of them. She says:

She heard the names, swirling ribbons in the wind of history: nigger, nigger bitch, heifer, mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon, whore, hot tail, thing, it. ('Our Grandmothers')

History is like the wind, uncontrollable and constantly on the move. The representations are like ribbons that drift along with the wind. History carries these representations and makes them available in the present. By questioning these representations Angelou endeavors to transform the collective memory of her race as well as that of the American nation. Brian Conway opines that "what, when and how we remember ... is relational..." (Conway 2010: 443). Memories are always evoked and shaped in the context of the present. Therefore she feels the compelling need to give voice to her ancestors as an attempt to write their own history. Considering herself as the "hope" of her ancestors, she says:

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave. ('Still I Rise')

If the problem lies in history the solution also lies therein. The flaws of the past have to be mended. Hence, the rich legacy of the communal past has to be acknowledged, respected and incorporated into the present.

Countering Capitalism

Besides History another oppressive larger structure which she engages with is Capitalism. In one of her interviews Chandra Talpade Mohanty boldly claims that capitalism colonizes women more than men. Capitalism is essentially patriarchal in nature. Patriarchy in the social sphere is replaced by

capitalism in the economic sphere. So when women come from the private to the public sphere they are subjected to the same kind of control. Capitalism targets women in two ways – as producers (in the form of cheap labour) and as consumers (in the form of buyers of various products meant to create the perfect woman). Angelou displays a strong defiance of capitalism by asserting her happiness and satisfaction with her life and natural self.

In the poem 'Weekend Glory' she sarcastically criticizes those "folks" who have voluntarily become the victims of capitalism. These people don't know the facts, posin' and preenin' and puttin' on acts, ('Weekend Glory')

Popular economist George Reisman believes "Individual freedom – an essential feature of capitalism – is *the foundation of security*" (qtd. in Weeks). Angelou interrogates this idea of freedom in a capitalist society and exposes it as a façade. In the above quoted stanza the poet subtly hints how capitalism has isolated individuals from their natural selves and their community. These people are forever pretending to be someone else. They live under the impression that that they are completely free and are living a fulfilling life. Angelou strikes at the very foundation of this belief by showing how the economy affects their lives. She says:

They move into condos up over the ranks,
pawn their souls to the local banks. Buying big cars
they can't afford, ridin' around town actin' bored.
(Weekend Glory)

The lines "pawn their souls/to the local banks" instantly remind us of Dr. Faustus who sold his soul to the devil in return of knowledge. In this case capitalism is the Devil from whom there is no escape. Capitalism believes that happiness originates only from material gains. Angelou proves this belief to be fallacious by describing the people moving around in cars as bored. She, on the contrary, lives a free and happy life because she keeps away from the lures of a capitalist society. She emphasizes community bonding as opposed to material development as a source of happiness and security:

head cross town to my friend girl's house
where we plan our round.

We meet our men and go to a joint
(Weekend Glory)

She further states that her choices are based on what she wants rather than what is made desirable by the capitalist economy which promotes itself on advertisements. Thus she asserts her control over her own life:

I get my hair done for my own self's sake,
so I don't have to pick and I don't have to rake.

(Weekend Glory)

Angelou mentions that she maintains a distinct life of her own rather than just reducing herself to a cog in the capitalist machinery. She is not just a passive consumer but an active producer. She produces her own happiness.

In 'Still I Rise' she reiterates this idea of happiness. She tells the readers that she is happy as if she has "got oil wells/Pumping in my living room" or as if she has "got gold mines/Diggin' in my own

backyard". She clarifies that her happiness stems from her acceptance and appreciation of her life not from any other material or monetary source.

Redefining White Hegemonic Epistemology

Angelou challenges the discourses of race and gender through the use of images and metaphors which redefine her as a woman and as a human being. She employs certain unconventional literary strategies which provide an appropriate channel for expressing her emotions. She chooses objects which conventionally have negative connotations but looks at them positively. In 'Our Grandmothers' she refers to the black children as weeds. Weeds are always perceived as obstructions and useless. But Angelou adores the weeds for their capacity to grow and survive without any kind of nurturing support. In "Still I Rise" she compares herself to "dust". It is something insignificant and trampled upon. But Angelou sees its power in its lightness and ability to move freely. She asserts:

You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise. ('Still I Rise')

A little later in the poem she compares herself to the sun, moon and the tides. Comparing woman with elements of nature is nothing new in literary texts. But there is a marked difference in the natural objects that were compared with women earlier and the objects that Maya Angelou compares women with. Earlier women were usually compared to flowers and Earth (as evident in the hackneyed phrase 'Mother Earth') to highlight their beauty or their ability to nurture. But these are the static and passive elements of nature on which human agency (usually in the form of men) worked. Angelou moves beyond these clichés. In comparing herself with the sun, moon and the tides she associates herself with the powerful and moving elements of nature which have a determining influence on human lives as well as on the universe. Moon is symbolic of rejuvenation and the Sun symbolizes life and energy. Moon controls the movement of tides. In associating herself with both the Moon and the tides, Angelou claims that she is her own power and motivation:

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise. ('Still I Rise')

She also compares herself to an ocean:
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide ('Still I Rise')

The fact that she refers to herself as a black ocean reflects her assertion of her racial identity.

In "Phenomenal Woman" she describes herself as phenomenal, the interpretation of which is not confined to her extraordinariness or magnanimity. In philosophy phenomenal is anything derived from the senses rather than the mind. In describing herself as phenomenal she asserts her physical being rather than being an abstract product of the patriarchal imagination.

She then goes on to describe one of her encounters with a group of men where:

The fellows stand or
 Fall down on their knees.
 Then they swarm around me,
 A hive of honey bees.
 ('Phenomenal Woman')

Angelou here becomes the center of attention. The last two lines invoke the image of a queen bee surrounded by a group of bees. A queen bee is the single reproductive female in a colony of bees. In this skewed allusion to the queen bee, Angelou punctuates her competence of not just biological but also intellectual and cultural reproduction. In being the queen, the center, she assumes a position of power. In depicting her movement from the periphery to the center she redefines the social space and gender relations.

Colonization is based on the production of knowledge. Knowing something is in a way controlling it. She contends that she cannot be colonized. She makes constant references to the "secret" of her personality and her "inner mystery" suggesting that there is always a part in every human being which inaccessible to others and therefore cannot be known or decoded. Hence, it cannot be controlled or colonized. In claiming so she questions the validity of White knowledge. Whites have created ideas about race and gender but these ideas are crude and partial. They don't capture the lived experiences of the people.

Men themselves have wondered
 What they see in me.
 They try so much
 But they can't touch
 My inner mystery.
 When I try to show them,
 They say they still can't see.
 ('Phenomenal Woman')

This blindness on the part of the society is induced by the stereotypes produced by White metanarratives of knowledge. They don't want to see her as anything beyond a weak and insignificant black woman. Knowledge produced by the Whites is incapable of understanding the complexity of her being. In the above quoted lines she declares that it is not she who has been invisible (being a black and a woman) rather it the hegemonic group which lacked the sight and the vision to perceive her. She makes similar claims in "Our Grandmothers":

She said, But my description cannot
 fit your tongue, for I have a certain way of being in
 this world ('Our Grandmothers')

Through her arguments Angelou shows that
 does she not fit into any clearly defined conceptual
 category

Conclusion

Angelou's poems are a thoughtful study of the contemporary times where she manages to merge history, politics and economy into literature. Art is viewed as a product of the context in which it appears. Angelou invests art with the power to change and transform its own context. For her art is not for art's sake rather a medium to bring positive transformation in the society.

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