

Feminist Reading in Maya Angelou's Poetry

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Abstract

Black feminism is a thought that argue with the philosophy of class oppression gender identity and reaction from early childhood, women were trained to accept a system which divided society into male and female. This differentiation results in women oppression as she was considered to be sub-ordinate to men. The black feminists are conscious of the denials deprivation stresses and strains. They also saw the tensions anxieties, sufferings, struggle mental exploitation and dehumanization of black women. Maya Angelou, the author, critic scriptwriter is an icon for the civil rights and feminist movement. She speaks out the survival, development and problem of the identity crisis of African-American people. She depicts it in the best of words she could. She was very impressed by the survival of her ancestors and previous generations, especially when she thinks about all their mishaps, misfortunes and struggles. In her poem, Africa she represents a rather vivid picture of the colonizing process Africa. The colonized Africa is seen as a mother robbed of her children. Injured by merciless colonizers and left helpless and depressed Maya confesses "I will not allow anybody to minimized my life, not anybody, not a living soul body" (conversations with Maya Angelou 158)

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Maya Angelou (1928-2014) is a very influential voice, when it comes to issues such as gender and racial equality. She urged women to respect themselves and to be active in taking the offense. If they are offended, rather than naturally accepting the inferiority and being submissive if mistreated. She emphasized the problems of marginalized society more than the humanity as whole. Problems of disparities of gender, class and race got addressed, making these issues central themes in Angelou's.

Black women refuse to accept sub-ordinate position in the congress racial Equality (CORE) and student known violent coordinating committee (SNCCE), The two core civil rights groups , thus resulting in a split across gender lines. Increasing number of black women separated from mail authority while forming their group in the community (a critical companioin, 70)

Maya Angelou's published *I know why the caged bird sing* in 1969, black women started forming black sisters leagues and discussion group for sharing their voice on issues challenging female oppression under patriarchal order, Kate Millet's says:

The social control of women in the free society such as the United States was not carried out through the rigged authoritarian system of force. Rather, it took place by means of the engineering of consent among women themselves. Instant of being openly coerced into accepting their secondary status, women were conditioned into embracing it by the process of sex-role stereotyping... (Sexual politics97)

Black feminism argues that sexism, class, oppression and racism are bound together. The way these relate to each other is called intersectionalist. It tends to feminism that strives to overcome sexism and class oppression. But ignore race can discriminate against women through racial bias.

One of the theories that evolved out of the Black feminist movement is Alice walker's womanism. Alice walker and other womanists pointed out that black woman experienced a different and intense kind of oppression than that of white women. Womanism is a critical with what black women understood to be the anti - male sentiments of white feminists and white feminist movements. Black womanist such as Alice walker and Sherly Anne Williams believed that Womanist" is preferable to "feminist". It is actively anti-separatist, Sherly Anne William notes that "womanist theory is by definition, committed to the survival are wholeness of entire people."(In search of our mother's gardens)

There is an important alliance between post colonial feminists. They often overlap both with transnational feminism and third world

feminism. And black feminist they have struggled for recognition not only from man in their own culture, but also from western feminists.

Kimberle Williams Crashaw Notes

Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory from antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discreet set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the intersection of race and gender (The Black Feminist Reader)

Black feminist organization had to face the first of the three challenges these women faced "to prove to other black women that feminism was not only for white women. Lastly they had to demand that white women do "share power with them affirm diversity" and "fight the misogynist tendencies of Black Nationalism." With the challenges the black feminist were often refer to as "war weary warriors."

The civil right era was a pivotal time for black feminism. It spurred the evolutions and definition for it. They who worked alone with each other .The second wave feminist movement was in full swing and provided the nurturing ground for black feminism to thrive. The inter sectionalist of gender and racial equality movements made black feminism into a movement for cause.

Angelou's writings mirror her felinity and express her strong and powerful identity as women, and more importantly as a black woman. A number of inherent racial and sexual references prevailing in the authors seven autobiography As well as in her poems. The first autobiography *I know why the caged bird sings* unravels a number of questions posed in regards to feministic reading. Question relating such as whether the character of main focus are strong , aware females, whether these females bond with each other in the pervasive patriarchal social order, and whether the themes

developed through the book have direct to relevance o women. Maya Angelou is a strong and aware \oman. Lupton, who writes:

Caged bird does not project a strong, positive image of women we argue that the stubbornness and determination of little Maya to keep silence for five years after being raped at the age of eight, construct the firm and powerful character of Angelou's. (*The Critical Companion*, 90)

Angelou through her poems depict different aspects African American culture. She displaced that atrocities inflicted upon them as well as shown cases the major two over come such kind of oppression. Every generation of Africa American has struggled for freedom. In the struggle each generation has experienced some kind of loss, destruction or even death. She is unhappy with her people for not rising her voice against the injustice done to them. This is shown in the poem *Africa*,

Took her young daughters
Sold her strong son
Crushed her with Jesus
Bled her with her guns,
Thus she has lain, (Africa 82)

She is angry with her own people for not showing any resistance against the white and the unfair treatment done to them. She lists this experience through her poems *When I think About Myself*,

They grow the fruit
But eat the rind
I laughs until I start to crying
When I think about my folks,
(*When I think About Myself* 29)

In the poem “still I rise” beside talking to the oppressors about the racial issues and the personal obstracles , she is bringing in feminine sexual notes. She talks directly about her feminine sassiness and sexiness, making strait physical reference to her body. Despite the subject of sexism sultry and somewhat indecent. The reder is left with every convincing impression of the author powerfull.” I” as a blak American female, who despite begun defeated, will fight against all odds. She would find in strength within her to rise and celebrate her integrity.

You may write me down in history
With you bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt

But still liked us I will rise (Still I rise 159-160)

In her poem “phenomenal women” is rather a frank anthem to feminism. Starting by depicting her not so attractive physical appearance “I” m not builds to suit a fashion model size “author directly contrasts it to her powerful, very self-assured Inner self “Phenomenal woman. That’s me” is creating a strong adversative effect. She makes use of her visual imagery in her way of expressing her physical feminity ,

The span of my hips,
The strides of my steps,
The curl of my lips,
I’m a woman
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me,

In the last stanza she states to her readers that she is very confident about herself and the people may not dwarf her down by her physical appearances. This is depicted here,

When you see me passing,
It ought to makes you proud.
I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
The palm of my hand,
The need for my care,
Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally,
Phenomenal woman,
That's me,

Angelou's poem 'Woman Work' directly deals with the domestic issues, which females are inevitably allocated and expected to address in a household. The authors talks about all the duties, including shopping, cooking, taking care of children, cleaning and ironing, as an inescapable part of being a wife and a mother. All the domestic work, a woman has to cope with everyday, cause the readers to somewhat sympathize with her. Reference to picking action to slavery, which signifies the women of the poem to be a black female and their by attributing the poem to the Afro-American feminism.

I have got the shirts to press
The tots to dress
The cane to be cut
I gotta clean up this hut
Then see about the sick
And the cotton to pick, (Women
Work 149)

Angelou refers to the inner growth of black females as it was restrained by the double oppression; on the one hand they were oppressed

due to the fact that they were black and, on the other hand , because they were women. Therefore, black women had to fight for both issues, so they made difference between them and the white women.

All women are oppressed and organized around your own oppression. White feminist did not take in account that factors like class, race, religion or sexual orientation. (*Feminist theory from; margin to center*)

This way of thinking can be seen in Maya Angelou's when she stay that "As far as I knew white women were never lonely except in books. White men adored then black men desired them and black women worked for them."(Singing and getting marry like Christmas) Therefore, we can argue that also the writer felt that sexism had different connotation for white and black women. Black women were doubled oppressed but also by white women. However, the relationships between black women and men was different from their white analogues, as they were fighting as a collective for their whites and against racial prejudices their was solidarity between them. As analogues said:

The white American men makes the white American women may be not superfluous but just a little kind of decoration rarely important to turning around the wheels of the state. Well the black American woman has never been able to feel that why. No black American men at any time in our history. In the United States has been able to feel that he did not need the black women right ghetto wherever. The black women is integral, if not a most important part of the family unit. (*Conversations with Maya Angelou*)

Hagen states that Angelou writes about "the pride of blackness and African heritage"(the heart

of women, mind of a writer ,soul of a poet). Like most African American writers, she plays the role of maker of black culture. She helps produce among African American the desire to rediscover their own culture as well as a reshaped their self –identity. She assures that the black writer are in position to inform and to influence “ Ain’t that Bad?” is typical representation of stressing “ black is beautiful”; “ Bad” is the black slang for “ good” Hagen explains that the poets praises black culture, mores, customs and leaders.

Combahee river collective said : “we struggle together with black man against racism , while we also struggle with black men about sexism” Maya Angelou is the perfect example of that due to the fact that she was completely involved in both struggles with her poetry, using the same weapon to fight the boundaries.

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