



Vol.5. S1., 2018

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

FEMINISM IN SELECT POEMS OF MAYA ANGELOU

R. JAYASREE¹, Dr. SUMATHY K. SWAMY²

¹II MA English Literature, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women

²ssociate Professor, Department of English, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women

African-American literature is an ingredient of World literature which is produced wholly by the Black-Americans. Feminism is delineated as a cultural and economic movement which targeted towards establishing complete equality and legal protection for women in all spheres of life. Famous writers of this movement are Alice Walker, Judith Felterbey, Michele Wallace, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter and others. The aim of feminist is to understand women's oppression keeping in mind gender, race, class and sexual preference.

Maya Angelou is an American poet, storyteller, activist, and auto biographer. She is a Black woman writer living in America. She uses literature as a medium to express her feelings about her milieu. The reviewers praise Angelou for addressing political and social issues related to African-Americans and for challenging the legitimacy of traditional American values and myths.

Maya Angelou's famous poem *Phenomenal Women* was published in 1978. As per the history of feminism, this poem was written on second waves as it was begun on 1960. In this poem, Maya Angelou as a poet and a speaker describes a woman as a great personality because of her high confidence.

"Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size". (1-2)

Maya Angelou tries to explain that although she did not have a perfect body, she is strong, brave and confident.

"I walk into a room

Just as cool as you please". (14-15)

These lines show the high confidence of African-American women.

"I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me". (10-13)

One can understand that Maya Angelou is so proud of herself and she always believed that she was a phenomenal woman. She revealed that she was an extraordinary and impressive woman. Angelou depicts how the people in the society reciprocate her, look down upon her, especially the men folk. Moreover, it shows how history sees her because of her Black origin.

"Men themselves have wondered

What they see in me.

They try so much

But they can't touch

My inner mystery." (30-34)

Angelou says that men never really understand how some women can take drastic action in their lives even though they have many obstacles to overcome. They think it is unwise to believe one woman would take such an action.

All the imagery in this poem shows that African-American women are thankful for what God has given to them and they are proud to be born as African-American women having dark skin and curly hair. The writer says that African-American women have inner beauty which is totally different from other women. She tells African-American women have positive value in evaluating their selves and they struggle against the oppression realizing their strength and uniqueness.

Maya Angelou's best known poem *Still I Rise* was published in 1978. It is an empowering and powerful poem all about the struggle to overcome injustice and prejudice. This poem is about a Black woman living among the Whites.

"You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise." (1-4)

The opening stanza depicts how the speaker is treated unkindly by the people those who are around her. It also highlights the racial segregation that has suppressed, oppressed and marginalized the Blacks for centuries. The last line shows that she still has high spirit to lead her life in her way in spite of all hardships she had to face.

"Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room." (6-8)

Maya Angelou says that when she succeeds, people around here are 'beset with gloom'. She questions this.

"Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise." (9-12)

Angelou compares herself to the sun and the moon as they are affected by the tides. She says that though the people in the society oppress her, it is in her nature to rise up and stand against the oppression and succeed in her life .

"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." (21-24)

The oppression towards Maya Angelou is depicted in the above lines. But in the last line she comments "But still, like air, I'll rise". This shows her strength and power to survive. No matter what has been said about her and done to her, she will still rise up and succeed. It also reflects the indomitable collective consciousness which propels the entire Black community.

"Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide." (29-34)

Angelou's identity is revealed in the above lines. The poetess comments that she is like a black ocean, holding in all the "shame" and "pain" of her race and her gender within her tide. However, all is not black in her world.

"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.” (35-43)

The poetess exhibits her strength and determination to emerge out of dark nights into the brightness of day, carrying within her the legacy of her ancestors, and their hope of finding a new life in America when they arrived in that country as slaves. Throughout the poem, she maintains her tone of proud defiance.

In this poem, Angelou says that nothing and no one can oppress or keep her down. She knows that her own success is not liked by the racist people in her society. So, she directs some questions at the society that has long tried to keep her and her community oppressed. The speaker does not intend to allow the atrociousness of society or the pain of the past to stop her from becoming all that she ever dreamt of being. Reading this poem, one can understand that no matter the cruelty, the circumstance, and the method, the victim will rise and overcome the adversity.

Like early slave narratives, Angelou depicts herself by being subjective. Her works deal with discrimination based on racism and identity. Her works reflect mainly the suppression of women and are evidences of marginalization of Black women due to their race. She employs figurative language and imagery in *Phenomenal Women* and *Still I Rise* to show the pride, confidence and positive self-evaluation of the African-American women. From these poems, one can understand that African-American women are proud of their race and are confident enough to succeed in their life by overcoming physical, emotional and mental barriers.

Works Cited:

Angelou, Maya. *And Still I rise*. Random house. 1798.

Anon, (2018). [ebook] Available at: <http://etheses.uin-malang.ac.id/2996/1/11320118.pdf> [Accessed 18 Jul. 2018].

Bloom Harold. *Black American Women Fiction Writers*. Chelsea House. 1995.

Bright Dreams Journal. (2018). *Analysis of Still I Rise by Maya Angelou*. [online] Available at: <https://brightdreamsjournal.com/still-i-rise-maya-angelou-analysis-poem/> [Accessed 18 Jul. 2018].

En.wikipedia.org. (2018). *List of feminist literature*. [online] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_feminist_literature [Accessed 18 Jul. 2018].

Media.neliti.com. (2018). [online] Available at: <https://media.neliti.com/media/publications/81574-EN-analysis-of-feminism-in-maya-angelous.pdf> [Accessed 18 Jul. 2018].

Permatasari, I. (2018). AN ANALYSIS OF FEMINISM IN MAYA ANGELOU'S POEMS BY USING HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES.

Poetry Foundation. (2018). *Maya Angelou*. [online] Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou> [Accessed 18 Jul. 2018]

Prezi.com. (2018). *Analysis of Phenomenal Woman by Maya Angelou*. [online] Available at: https://prezi.com/rt6h1r_of2kg/analysis-of-phenomenal-woman-by-maya-angelou/ [Accessed 18 Jul. 2018].