

IDENTITY ASPIRATION IN MAYA ANGELOU'S POETRY

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Abstract

Maya Angelou is an accomplished black writer and the director, the producer, the actress, the playwright, the poet and the professor of Literature as well. She was one of the great voices of contemporary African American literature who got the highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Mr. Obama in Feb. 2011. Her poetry projects the social and political issues and challenges to the long-established American values. She has several volumes of poetry at her credit. Oh Pray My Wings are Gonna Fit Me Well (1975), Still I Rise (1978), Shaker, Why Don't you Sing (1983), I Shall Not Be Moved (1990) are some of her notable works which reveal the outcry because of the provided conditions for her people in white world. She played a key role in conceptualizing her social condition and puts forth a remorseless humiliation of her group. She is the conscious modernist who tries to revive racial memories in order to connect herself with the past but also provides the way of getting escape from those. The present paper is an attempt to reveal the struggle of black people for their survival which Maya Angelou depicts in her poetry. Her attitude towards life made her work more sharp and vivacious, which shows her increasing concern with social issues like racism and identity crisis which are needed to get unveiled. It can be concluded that every person is the important part of the society and have a right to live the respectful life.

Key Words: Society, politics and identity

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Maya Angelou, the notable black writer demonstrates her private experiences and reopens the American history. Her poetry is political, social and critical presentation of the American past. Her work is mirroring the status of blacks especially black women in white society. It is her outcry which opens the humiliation and rejection. Her poetry shows her intolerant feelings, finding her attempt hopeless for survival. It is intervention in American historiography where the overwhelming presence of black people is felt. The people, who were taken to America, used as the workers, slaves but treated like less than animals, uprooted from homelands, the people felt orphan. They remain homeless, identitiless and even considered cultureless. Angelou felt impatient due to this stipulation and so she unveils her inner world and exhorts the masters to stop the assault on the blacks and recognize their humanity who refused them the citizenship. The sensitive world of Angelou expresses the inner violence. She states in her autobiography *The Caged Bird*:

“Every person I knew has a hellish horror of being called out of his name. it was dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, figs, dings, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks.” (106)

The blacks were not called by their original names. The nicknames were gives by their white masters and generally refereed ‘boy’ though old by age. It damages their identity and feels life without specific root and identity. Angelou stresses in her poem ‘The Calling of Names’:

He went to being called a coloured man
 After answering to "hey nigger",

 Hey baby, watch my smoke.

 Now you'll get hurt
 If you don't call him "Black".

Angelou explains how the black people were called in different historical phases. The political atmosphere of the country rejects the power and space for their existence, creating a dilemma about their survival. The naming has always held a reality redefining importance for black people. She expresses the socio-political issues and challenges the legitimacy of established American principles. She refuses the unjust social atmosphere. The superiors think that the blacks were unfit for freedom and ideally suited for slavery. In one of her poem 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' she expresses the life of the black people like a 'caged bird', who seeks for the freedom which seems far away from blacks. She writes:

The caged bird sings
 with fearful trill
 of the things unknown
 but longed for still
 and his tune is heard
 on the distant hill
 for the caged bird
 sings of freedom

The poem shows the suffering of the blacks for the survival. They are inhumanly treated and humiliated as if animals. Angelou becomes cognizant for her place and boldly reveals her determination to rise above the demoralizing defeat and decides to live her life with her own terms and conditions. Angelou points out the plight of black people in many of her poems. She addresses that the identity formation seems difficult for them due to

racism and poverty. They lead the painful journey of life. In the same poem she expresses the condition of the black people. She states:

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.

Angelou understands the blacks are unable to shape their identity due to the oppression and cultural trauma which is cultivated in the life of her people from generations.. She realizes about the depicted negative impact on her community which she experienced around her. She believes that it is impossible to create the sense of acceptance by achieving the social standard of whites because the powerful social group always causes to create the sense of lacunas and infertile, their sense of importance which can cause the self-assurance in them. Oppressor's ethics can deform all intimate human relationship and even threaten the self.

Her pen becomes her instrument to propagate her inner world and make the universe know the reality about the unjust to her community. She seems to asset that there is need to open the voices against the racism and classism. She protests against the oppression and stresses her claim for the humanity. She realizes the importance of existence and proclaims her right. She writes in her poem '*Africa*':

Now she is rising
remember her pain
remember the losses
her screams loud and vain
remember her riches
her history slain
now she is striding
although she had lain .

She asserts the new Africa with the new attitude. She wants not to recall the past experiences of slavery and boldly and strongly emphasizes the fresh and beautiful Africa. The history of slavery and its memories she discards from her mind and advised her people to forget about the same. Her father is the guide for her. She said that her father had survived as he comprehends the circumstances. He continues to exist with the optimism. He successfully forgets the forefather's pain and created the space for himself. Without fearing for the available social and political situations he tried to castoffs the pangs and anguish of their past. It stresses the importance of one's roots in the formation of self. It emphasizes the struggle and situation which opens the understanding, the institutional racism and sexism against black female particularly. It makes public not only the 'reconstructed memory' but also 'deconstructed history'. It discloses the emotional and psychic consequences of slavery. It is the painful journey of the blacks in external world for their emancipation and response to 'rejection' by the people of specific community who prohibit them as human beings. Angelou's poetry shows the struggle for claiming owns subjectivity.

Angelou got the power leaving her terror and fear behind. She hopes for the better future. She writes in her poem "Life Does not Frighten Me",

I go boo
 Make them shoo
 I make fun
 Way then run
 I won't cry
 So they fly
 I just smile
 They go Wild
 Life does no frighten me at all.

Angelou insists to behave boldly without fearing the social and political obstacles. She seems to affirm that when one tries to live without fear then only the source of space or

identity he/she finds. The terror cannot generate the courageous assertion for the emancipation. She believes that the daring is essential to get rid from the pangs of social injustice. Life loves the person who dares to live it. She gathers the courage and provides the new outlook to her people for perception. She wants to make their mind full of confidence and fearless to face the situations.

Maya Angelou writes in f her poem 'The Lesson' about her sturdy aspiration of forgetting painful past. She Writes:

Memory of old tombs,
Rotting flesh and worms do
Not convince me against
The challenge. The years
And cold defeat live deep in
Lines along my face.
They dull my eyes, yet
I keep on dying,
Because I love to live.

She asserts that the past memories ill not make her handicap but those will be the strong path for her to lead life with confidence. She claims her love for life. Her poetic aspiration shows her great wish to survive, throwing away the obstacles which are coming in the success of her life. She symbolically guides her people to overcome the defeats and disappointments and audaciously face the life's obstacles. She does not like to frighten the odds of the life. The nostalgia defiantly is the source of pain and suffering but she wants to throw these memories also. She feels that the happiness and the joy will arrive only after forgetting the past. There is need to bring the positive desire in thinking. According to her the past memories may be the cause of tension and sense of defeat which may be the obstruction and the cause of lack of confidence but she wants to look towards those in different way. She assertively desires to face the every barrier but with confidence, taking it as a way to her success.

May Angelou state her bold attempt of creating her space in the society where she and her forefathers faced the humiliation and negligence. She writes in her poem 'Recovery':

A last love,
proper in conclusion,
should snip the wings
forbidding further flight.
But I, now,
reft of that confusion,
am lifted up
and speeding toward the light.

Her confidence to face the every situation and remain firm for her place is her guideline to her people. She hopes that the dark life of her people will be vanish only after when they forcefully and powerfully neglect the decided and existence places for them and turn toward the light, the symbol of development, the symbol of existence and the symbol of new values for their constitutional rights. Her bold appeal shows her way to live the life forgetting the forbidden views of the masters. She wants to obtain the wings of confidence which can help her to construct her breathing space in the society. Angelou uses to emphasize what her poetry expresses about identity and race, reveals a series of lessons about resisting racist tyranny, a sequence that leads Maya progressively from helpless rage and indignation to forms of subtle struggle, and finally to absolute and active protest.

Her poetry shows that the bright days are close to them which will defiantly offer them new spaces and new positive changes. The social and political themes of her poetry suggest the need of reformation. She offers the new way of looking towards life, full of assurance. Her factual experiences make her poetry more sensible and sparkling. Through her every poem she proclaims hopefulness for the happy life. She proved herself as the spring of strength and veracity. She has defeated the past and her personal insecurities and constructs her resourceful work which is personal, still universal. Her broad vision shows her deep love for

life which have an extraordinary inspirational quality and may lead as the instructional values to society. I would like to conclude my paper with her optimistic lines in her poem entitled 'On The Pulse Of Morning'

The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space
To place new steps of change
Here, on the pulse of this fine day.

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