

The Glorification of Womanhood in The Poems of Maya Angelou: A Study

Dr. A. Ganesan,
Assistant Professor of English,
Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College,
(Affiliated to University of Madras)
Mylapore, Chennai- 04.600 004.
ganesanbliss@gmail.com

Abstract: This research paper is an endeavor to throw insights on the exaltation of femininity in Maya Angelou's *Phenomenal Woman* and *Woman Me*. Maya Angelou, an Afro-American renowned poet is considered to be a revolutionary and a wild poet. The women are constantly targeted and tormented in the patriarchal society. Therefore, Feminism universally deals with the depredations of the Male Chauvinism on feminine identity. However, the selected poems differ from the other confessional verses. Her poems have been used as a focal point to diffuse the act of misogyny, to defy the prejudices of race and gender inequalities in the United States. Besides, encomiums have been profoundly showered on womanhood that replicate her own courageous nature. The delineation of prides of womanhood and the qualities of feminineness, the demonstration of significant resistance to harassment and suppressions is the common theme of her genre. The researcher has carefully picked the above specified poems to examine the spirit of womanhood in detail.

Introduction:

Maya Angelou, civil rights activist, a peerless revolutionary, the only Afro-American poet who got a chance to recite at President's inauguration ceremony in 1993 made the entire Afro- American women feel proud through her poetry. Being an Afro-American, she experienced the first hand racial discriminations. Having had a very tough life in the phallogocentric society, she became a virtual mute and did not speak for five years. Her memoir '*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*' made her widely popular and brought her international name and fame. She has bravely expressed her unpleasant experiences in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die* and in other poems. Formerly President of the United States Barack Obama lauded her as "a brilliant writer, a fierce friend, and a truly phenomenal woman."

The Theory of Jouissance:

The French word 'Jouissance' means enjoyment and pleasure. Though the word jouissance means pleasure, to a large extent it is a combination of pleasure and pain. Sigmund Freud, the father of Psychoanalysis in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* vividly explained the process of obtaining pleasure. The absence of pain fetches pleasure and 'the most painful experiences can yet be felt as highly enjoyable' stated Freud (1920, p. 17). Jacques Lacan

further developed the concept of Jouissance in a seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Lacan said “Life itself is an apparatus of jouissance.” Julia Kristeva in her essay ‘On Abjection’ affirms that Jouissance can also be called ‘Narcissism’s immanence.’ Narcissism is an excessive admiration of one’s own body and deriving pleasure from it. In the chosen poems by Maya Angelou, she overly adores her body and finds happiness in it.

The Concept of Jouissance Theory in the chosen poems of Maya Angelou:

Though Feminists fight for a common cause of social, economic and political rights, they also feel proud of their womanhood and their bodily structures. Maya Angelou outwardly and explicitly expresses that she is a phenomenal woman. If she is really a phenomenal woman, she could have left it to the people to understand. However, she consciously asserts and uses recurrently the explicit term that she is a phenomenal woman. It is not a sort of an expression of feeling inferior that she is insistent on using the term. There is nothing subtle about her expressions as well. She hits nail on the head by describing her bodily structures. Women are reluctant to discuss their body and structure as the deliberation on body brings fears and tears. Though it is painful, Maya Angelou finds happiness in describing her physique. The identification of things with her body demonstrates that she is too proud of her physique and structures.

The Glorification of Womanhood in *Phenomenal Woman*:

“I think women have to develop courage. You’re not born with courage, but you develop it. Try to develop your courage with smaller things. [...] One way to develop courage is to not entertain company who debase you. Don’t laugh at someone who is laughing at you or putting you down. Take offense. When someone says ‘I hope you won’t be offended,’ then you probably will be”

Maya Angelou courageously stated this in an interview. She never talks about the soul and spirit of femininity in the poem *Phenomenal Woman*. She keeps her assertion of her self-identity very material and physical. She feels that her self-identity and self-assertion to great extent depends on how much she loves her body. She attains the inner mystery through her body. When there is no body, soul or inner mystery does not exist. She is reinforcing her inner mystery at the expense of discarding her body. She does not feel ashamed of her fattiness or curvy body. Women normally do not apparently come out and describe their body. She bravely breaks out the taboo. As a source of orgasm, she does not talk about only one part of her body. For women every part of her body is a source of pleasure. Most of the poems of Maya Angelou and other feminist writers pen down their sufferings and dearth of freedom in the society, but the chosen poems for the research paper express the spirit of womanhood. The use of personal pronoun ‘I’ and ‘me’, ensures that when every woman reads the poem, she also can feel proud of her features of figure.

In the first stanza, she feels proud by describing every part of her body. She articulates that her magnificence lies in

“The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.”
I am a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.

Maya Angelou extols her femininity by using an epiphora 'Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, That's me' at the end of every stanza. She further adds that for fair women, only the colour makes them fair and beautiful whereas for black women every part makes them attractive. She also agrees with Irigaray and Cixous that male's enjoyment centres on only one part whereas for women, they have multiple erogenous zones to derive pleasure.

In the second stanza, when other pretty women and men ask the secret of her attractiveness, she eulogizes her beauty by saying her exquisiteness lies in

'It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.'

She also compares women to honey and men to bees. Men wish to come closer to her and treat her as a goddess and consider her a queen bee.

In the third stanza, Maya Angelou extols her beauty by saying her charm depends on

'It's in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.'

Her real mystique lies inside as well as outside. She expounds her every feature of her body and finds happiness in it.

In the last stanza, she sums up by saying her gorgeousness lies in the click of her heels, the bend of her hair and the palm of her hand. She injects confidence to the women readers and advises women not to feel bad about their features. Women not necessarily display their talents and try to attract men, if they just know their values and mind their work, men will get attracted and fall at their feet as they are naturally charismatic.

The use of words like 'pretty women, 'I am not cute or to suit a fashion model's size' show that the society has a standard definition of beauty and black women do not meet the expectations of the pretty women and the other gender and the other race. Though those expectations make her unhappy, she does not worry too much about the standards designed by the society and she feels the entire clan of black women is more beautiful and more attractive.

The Extolment of Womanhood in *Woman Me*:

Maya Angelou once said in an interview: "Complaining is very dangerous, I'd rather protest than complain: Because whining not only makes you ugly but it lets the brute know there's a victim in the neighborhood." That is why Maya Angelou picked out the language as a revolutionary weapon to glorify, encourage and motivate women. Being a woman of action, Maya was rebellious against the prejudices towards the Afro American community. *Phenomenal woman and Woman Me* created a huge influence on Afro-Americans and made the other women feel proud of their gender.

Whoever reads the title of the poem *Woman Me*, it refers to them and makes them feel delighted. There is no punctuation mark between the word 'woman' and 'me'. She underscores that her identity is inseparable and she is every woman. She is greatly enchanted by saying, 'Begger-Kings and red-ringed Priests' whatever may be the position that men hold; they have to be underpinned by women because women are mentally stronger than men. The other gender might feel that they are 'a grasp of Lions', but they will have to repose in the 'Lap of Lambs'. She further complements in the second stanza that women must be safeguarded in order to save her from the 'winds of death.' Woman's laughter is so earsplitting and strong, it would even subdue the 'bells of ruined cathedrals.' In the final stanza, Maya Angelou feels overjoyed by saying children invariably go to women as the pious men seek shelters in God. It is the woman who guides, supports and teaches the children and how to lead their lives.

"Children reach between your teeth
for charts to live their lives." Therefore, instead of crying to have been borne as a woman, they have to feel proud of being a woman.

The expressions like 'Kings and Priests seek glory at the meeting of your thighs' show that men approach women only for the sake deriving pleasure. Even though this unpleasant tiding makes her calamitous, she is not much concerned about men's behavior.

Conclusion:

"The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but does not mean it is identical within those differences" Audre stated. As they are perpetually oppressed across the continents every day, they always pen down the problems that they encounter in their daily lives. Therefore, most of the feminist poets are considered confessional poets. On the contrary, Maya Angelou's poems *Phenomenal Woman* and *Woman Me* delineate the power of femininity and the pride of being a woman. Dalit Feminism and Black Feminism share a common problem that both encounter the double subjugation. On the one hand, they are oppressed due to the fact that they are Dalits/ Blacks; on the other hand because they are women. Therefore, Dalit women and Black women have to battle for both the issues. When Angelou asked if she regarded herself as a feminist, she responded 'I am a feminist. I've been female for a long time now. I'd be stupid not to be on my own side'" (Lupton, 1998:71). Angelou was very proud of herself and wanted the world to see it. Thus she celebrates her womanhood and glorifies femininity.

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