

Black Feminism as a Structure of Dual Resistance in Maya Angelou's Select Poem

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Abstract

The historiography of feminism is based on the movement, narratives, and ideologies concerning the equal rights of women. But this stance has differed based on different cultures, ideologies, regions, and religions. Any movement or revolution comes as a reaction against some set of ideologies or principles. Feminism as such is a movement against the norms that bound women in a different sphere where women are deprived of the rights, justice, and equality that of what men usually enjoy. The predetermined gender role forces a woman to work and live on the structures that were originally designed by male figures. This set binary of men and women is the driving force that differentiates one inferior and another being superior. Race comes forefront in describing the term, Black. The racial stance of black and white is again a binary that discriminates one over another. Feminism as such is a perspective which traditionally being counted from the perspective of white women who were being marginalized by their male counterparts. But the emergence of black feminism is a reaction against black male dominance and white racial superiority as well. The traditional feminist notion always sought the right of middle-class white women where the voice of black women are deprived and remained unnoticed. The varied differences in feminist stance gave rise to the third wave of feminism where the oppression of black women and the women of the different races got way in its expression. Maya Angelou's poetry is a testimony of that dual resistance structure. This research will analyse Angelou's firsthand experience as a black women that depicted in her poem Phenomenal Women and Equality and the resistance that carried forward strengthening the black feminist movement.

Keywords: Maya Angelou, Black Feminism, Phenomenal Women, Equality, Dual Resistance, Traditional Feminist

Background

Any work of literature is an effort to express one's ideology against the social preconceived ideological setup. Feminism is a conscious effort to restructure the resistance model applied by Marxism and helped to build the notion that women truly are being marginalized and are forced to live in a structure that is dominated by male authorities. The primary objective of feminism is to seek equality in every sphere of their social and economic life. Undoubtedly women were subjected to various atrocities from unequal power relations, patriarchy, a masculine need, and the conscious treatment as a male subject. This conscious treatment has been so devastating that women accepted their role in society what men dictates and adopted them unconsciously. But unfortunately, feminism is not able to portray the universal appeal of every woman and thus its different variants emerged based on race, region, and religion.

The 1960s was no doubt a period of change and different perceptions that developed towards women's conditions. The movement emerged regarding the age-old reality of

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women's subjugation and thus demanded equality of women from a different corner. Although it was not new discourse rather it is a renewal of the past thoughts of celebrated writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence making it more progressive and necessary talk of the time. But what today we study about Feminist literary criticism is the by-product of the 'Women's Movement' of the 1960s. This movement is a literary one in the sense that it tried to trace the linguistic root of gender biases promulgated by literature and thus thought it necessary to question the authority and coherence of the context. The movement was successful as it tried to trace the most practical outcome influencing women's subjugation with respect to everyday conduct and activities.

The movement got further shaped in the 1970s tracing the mechanisms of male dominance and cultural milieu resulting in sexual, political, social, and familial inequality between men and women. The Feminine imagery, feminine word usage, and the extended metaphorical representation of the female figure were also tried to trace by the new movement. In the 1980s, Feminism changed its mood to more critical approaches to that of the findings of linguistics, structuralism, Marxism, etc. This time feminism switched its way from the traditional approach of attacking the set male perspective of the world to recollecting the lost record of female experience that they encountered and suppressed by history and literature.

The movement of black feminism has developed against the unequal status of their black origin and the patriarchy that dominated black women. The people of white skin have always deemed themselves as a superior entity to that of the black. The people of black origin had a constant fight to diminish this distinction while the white consciously adopted this superior notion in the process led to political, economic, and social discrimination.

The popular movement Black Lives Matter is one such major movement that portrayed the unethical white supremacy that resulted in killing numbers of Black lives over the centuries. The movement got international attention following the death of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in 2020. Almost 15 to 26 million people participated making it the largest movement in the history of America. British colonialism also propagated this white supremacy in the countries that they colonized. The blacks were captured and enslaved by the white. The constant marginalization and normalizing Black as inferior resulted in indignation amongst the black writers and thus, they protested against this notion to mitigate the differences. Maya Angelou is revolutionary in her approach and thus her notable poems Phenomenal Women and Still I Rise, Equality are best among all in her contribution to the movement.

Countless attempts have been made in mitigating the shortcoming of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, but still, the differences of inequality remain visible and thus the writer here extends his hand to contribute awareness of the racial inequality that comes forth of colonialism and the superiority complex of the white. The Black women had to live a different life because of the structure they were forced to live in. Maya Angelou in her way provided a bold vision for the black, to live a life of own dignity and independence from within. Angelou's poems are marked with bold imagery of racial differences and her anguish over the very gendered structure that determines the roles of two different sexes.

The emergence of black feminism can be traced back to colonial subjugation. Everywhere British set colony has differentiated the white to that of the other races. The self-proclaimed superiority of the white race and inferiority of the other race has been the evidence of much of the literature of the postcolonial period. The women thus suppressed in the manifold, because of being a woman and again of belonging from a different race other than the white. The black movement emerged against this distinction but those movements were

again patriarchal, seeking the need for racial equality without considering the women's oppression within the existing structure. In the words of black feminist writer Michelle Wallace:

“The black man ... particularly since the Black Movement has been in a position to define the black woman. He is the one who tells her whether or not she is a woman and what it is to be a woman...” (Simmonds, 1990: 314)

In short, the black movement was a failure for black women and thus it was felt necessary to resist the trending tendency of black women suppression by both white and black men. P. K. Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* pointed out two broad mottos of black feminism, that it questions the masculinist-patriarchal ideologies of the black movement and also questions the racism of the feminist movement. Black feminism thus sought the empowerment of black women not just in relation to white feminism but also against the black patriarchy. Black feminism as defined by Patricia Hill-Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* as “women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary Black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society” (Collins, 2000:56).

The Dual Resistance structure

As analyzed by Gatot Handy Febiyanto in his paper *The Idea Of Black Feminism in Maya Angelou's “Still I Rise” and Phenomenal Woman*:

“During slavery the breeder woman image portrayed black women as more suitable for having children than white woman. By claiming those black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, this image provided justification for interference for enslaved African-American lives. Slaves owner wanted black women to “breed” because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property.” (17)

The slave owners had a constant effort to control black women's sexuality in order to produce more children out of them making more slaves in their works. The black women have constantly been the object which is consciously suppressed and had no voice of her own making a subaltern character.

Maya Angelou's poetry serves a two-way purpose, both resistance and revolutionary. Angelou's celebrated poem *Still I Rise*, *Phenomenal woman*, *Caged Bird*, *Equality* are some of the revolutionary poems which have been written from the black women perspective and urged them to rise above the dominant male and racist structure living a life of their own and creating their own identity. Angelou herself in a way revolutionary giving hope to millions of black to rise above the dominant and speak of their rights and equality which has long been suppressed by colonial power and patriarchy. The urge of dual resistance against the stance of white feminists and the patriarchal structure has been the recurring element that Angelou portrayed in her poems.

Phenomenal Woman

The poem begins with the conventional discourse of prettiness and ugliness, ‘Pretty women wonder where my secret lies. / I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size’. (Angelou 130) Angelou says that when she is enquired by the pretty women about her secrecy of beauty. She in a negative mode reply that she is not built like a fashion model and her beauty is not the same as of them. Angelou's stance on fashion beauty is antagonistic because of its unnaturalness promoted by fashion industries. But when she replies to the queries of her beauty that it resides in the reach of her arms that is the ableness of her deeds with her arms, the span

of her hips or the curbed smile that she possesses is the source of her beauty they do not believe her because they see beauty in their own terms promoted by fashion industries for commerce. Yet Angelou believes herself phenomenal in her way and extraordinarily satisfied within herself.

The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally. (128)

Angelou forgoes the expression of her beauty in the subsequent stanzas as well. She tells that her beauty lies in the fire of her eyes. This is a symbolic comparison of fire to her beauty. Fire represents power and passion, thus Angelou tried to depict the passion of her beauty that resides in her within. Her white flashing teeth and the swing of her waist everything make her beautiful in her own way, 'and the flash of my teeth, /The swing in my waist'. (130)

She describes her beauty in lines 38 to 41 saying that her beauty lies in the arch that she has on her back. Her bodily description of breast size and the smile she possesses is just like the sun, which altogether makes her beautiful. Sun symbolizes optimism and so does is Angelou in her approach to life with full of passion and confidence.

It is in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style. (131)

Angelou continues expressing her beauty in lines 53 to 56 saying that even the sounds of her heels make her elegant and beautiful. Line 55 and 56 depict Angelou as a woman of love and caring. Her soft palm and caring nature make Angelou a beautiful woman. Angelou describes herself as a cool character who knew how to please a man. She compared herself to a hive in which bees fly around. In a way, she says that her beauty is incomparable and consistent to those only who have eyes to see.

But they can't touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them,
They say they still can't see. (131)

Here in this stanza Angelou also ponders over man's attitude towards her beauty. She expresses herself as mysterious and her beauty is a mystery that can't be touched. Even when she tries to show them, they can't see because it is the confidence within herself that everyone doesn't possess. Her confidence is that she is complete within herself and there is no necessity for anyone else's appraisal of her beauty.

Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing,
It ought to make you proud. (131)

Here in this stanza, Angelou says that why doesn't she lose her hope or bow her head. Angelou wants herself to be judged from her own parameter rather than the parameter created by society, pretty women, or men. She is of the opinion that one who is beautiful will be recognized and there won't be any need to shout and express.

'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me. (131)

The above line is the recurring theme that Angelou tries to portray in the whole poem. She is phenomenal in her way to be a woman and that's her beauty. The confidence that one possesses within makes oneself beautiful. There is no definition of it, it is rather a mystery to be beautiful. The confidence of beauty is the real beauty. The whole poem is centered on the concept of the black aesthetic. The beauty as defined by the west is concretely related to the fairness of women which has been propagated because of industrialization and commerce. The fairness product in a way stabilized the black identity as not beautiful. This notion has been inherently resisted by Angelou in her poem Phenomenal Women and voiced to be confident in whatever way they are. The confidence in oneself makes one beautiful.

Equality

The poem Equality vividly expresses the two opposing ideas of oppressor and oppressed. The oppressor speaks from the vision of the oppressed and demands equality to the long unequal status that they have created. The speaker is of the opinion that the oppressor has made a lens in their eyes which gives them the eyesight of dimness towards the oppressed. The superiority complex of the oppressor underestimates the oppressed even if they stand bold in their attitude towards life.

You declare you see me dimly
Through a glass which will not shine,
Though I stand before you boldly,
Trim in rank and marking time. (1-4)

In the second stanza, the poet recalls the days of her past. The ownership over the African people as a slave. The continuous mistreatment and subjugation by the west to the slave made a huge gap which is heard by the oppressor faintly. The writer is of the opinion that this subjugation won't stop their rage and rhythms.

You do own to hear me faintly
As a whisper out of rage,
While my drums beat out the message
And the rhythms never change (232)

The next two lines express the whole idea of the poem. The narrative set in the first two stanzas gets its shape with a repetitive quatrain in the third stanza Equality, and I will be free. (9) / Equality, and I will be free. (10) This quatrain shows the resistance and demand of the poet to have the equal opportunity of everything that has long been tarnished. The blacks are looked down upon by the white and a structure has been set by the settlers in their colony that anyone of different color is inferior while the white themselves kept them in a superior position. This marginalization has constantly sidelined the blacks and thus it is the art that came to its rescue in resisting the prevailing notion.

The fifth stanza expresses the painful history that the black lived. This stanza explores the days of slavery of the blacks. The established superior status of the white has discriminated and oppressed the black to the extent of making them slave. The writer is dehumanized recalling this shameful past. The poet is optimistic in her life and thus decides to step further ignoring the past. The oppressed have now decided to live and lead their own life marching forward diminishing the set differences.

We have lived a painful history,
We know the shameful past,
But I keep on marching forward,
And you keep on coming last. (232)

The sixth stanza is the repeating quatrains that follow in the whole poem, stressing the demand for equality. In the seventh stanza, the speaker commands of the going notion of blindness prevailed to the whole society. The speaker urges to uncover the blindness and to ponder over the inequality that prevailed. The pain and suffering are covered with blindness and deafness by the people who are among the oppressor. The speaker commands that the oppressor should acknowledge that they have seen their pain and heard their cries but besides all these, they remained unnoticed and unheard.

Take the blinders from your vision,

Take the padding from your ears, and confess you've heard me crying, and admit you've seen my tears. (232-233)

The final stanza comes with the continuation of the previous stanzas. The mood set in the previous stanzas continues in this stanza as well. The word "hear" indicates that someone else is asked to listen. The whole stanza expresses the frustration over the set pattern and asks to face the circumstances. The poet is of the opinion that they will remain constant in their stand and their rhythm will not change until equality is served.

Hear the tempo so compelling, hear the blood throb in my veins.
Yes, my drums are beating nightly, and the rhythms never change. (233)

The concluding couplet is the repetition of the central idea of the poem. 'Equality, and I will be free. / Equality, and I will be free.' (233) The speaker urges to be free from all structured differences and live a life of equality where one is heard and looked at by the other, where everyone has equal opportunity, where there is no obligation of superiority and inferiority, where prevails rights and justice. Throughout the poem, the idea of a life in obligation and the demand for equality, and a life of freedom has been the recurring aspect that has been traced through the metaphorical image of the cage and its relation to the bird.

Conclusion

Angelou's poem throughout reveals the structure of resistance of two threads of thoughts running down the alley. One set of thoughts is negative which seems to grow from distrust of men, utter oppression, suffocating, and stifling any voices of opposition. The other set of thoughts seems to respond to this negative shade and shows a motivated soul in aspiration of freedom in poems like Caged Bird, Still I rise, Equality.

To conclude with the finding of the research, it is seen that Black Feminism is not just a movement for liberation but also assimilates postcolonial drives of overthrowing the white supremacist position. Black Feminism is not just an economic and workplace-centered movement like global feminism, but also a personal movement and identity acceptance being one of its primary goals. It is also a cultural movement as it stresses the ideals and culture of black women against and above the global romantic image in which global feminism makes it fit. Angelou's poetry carves individual space and acclaims a separate position that is not just political but also based on aesthetics, like the Black Aesthetic movement. Maya Angelou advocated for the voice of the oppressed with a hope to better their living, giving a hope to dream for a better and just tomorrow.

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