



GENDER EMPOWERMENT IN MAYA ANGELOU'S 'STILL I RISE', 'PHENOMENAL WOMEN' & 'AIN'T THAT BAD'

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Abstract

Reviews and critiques of Maya Angelou's life and works in the literature review section give an important glimpse of Angelou, not only as a notable black figure but also as a powerful African-American woman. Her gender empowerment is not simply an arduous struggle against the domineeringly patriarchal African-American social setup; it is also a towering effort against the dominant white superiority of racial segregation within the United States. What has put her in this unique position is not just being a powerful figure, but her realization as a black woman having all the necessary feminine features that could be employed to elevate and motivate others through gender and race empowerment.

Key Words: black, empowerment, feminine, gender, patriarchal, racial discrimination, rise

Introduction

Citing her interview, Mary Jay Lupton argued in her paper, "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity," that Angelou has gone through almost all roles of a woman during her lifetime and has reflected them in her five-volume autobiographical narrative (257). However, what struck Lupton the most is Angelou's struggle that she called a "poetic adventure" of a woman with a myriad of characters springing back and forth in her biographical works (257).

Mary Jane Lupton argued that Angelou deliberately engaged in gender empowerment in her autobiographies. This also showed her realization of the same power in herself. This empowerment was demonstrated through her poems. She knew the power of being a black female.

Still I Rise by Maya Angelou is another poem that gave voice to her feelings of gender empowerment about black women strongly and powerfully. Comprising 43 lines, this poem has seven quatrains and two end stanzas which make a total nine stanzas. Some stanzas have the refrain "I rise" repeated several times. And this refrain repeated almost ten times in the entire poem shows the first signs of gender empowerment.

Succinctly reviewing, the entire poem comprises Angelou's defiance through black women's racial and physical attributes and interrogation of her oppressor or opponent's surprise or bewilderment at her lively attitude of showing him that she can rise up despite the oppression.

The very first line of the poem announces the audience with second person "You" with assertion that the oppressor or the addressee may do what he wants, but she will rise up; whereas stanzas one, three, six, eight and nine talk about her specific qualities that bewilder the oppressor; the second, fourth, fifth, and seventh stanzas highlight her questioning defiance. She questions her oppressor what surprises him, how it surprises him and that even if he wants her down, or subjugate



her, she has the courage to stand up again “I rise” (36). This strain of “I rise” (36) continues until it becomes a regular repetition in the end of the poem and is repeated almost five times in the last stanza.

Therefore, it becomes a refrain by the end.

A micro analysis of the poem may elicit more about Angelou’s gender empowerment interlinked with racial discrimination. Although the first stanza addresses her oppressor and she resolves by the end that she can rise up, the second stanza questions her oppressor. She feels pride and pleasure at how the oppressor is feeling the pangs of jealousy: “Why are you beset with gloom?” Maya Angelou asks the oppressor (Line 06). When she aligns natural elements with her, it seems as if she is deriding her oppressor that even nature is with her. It also shows that she is a daughter of nature who can rise up like the moon, the sun and the tides as stated in the third stanza. Therefore, there is no question of her hopelessness; she seems to say adding more questions in the fourth stanza to make the oppressor realize that what he wants to see she cannot do. The picture presented in these questions is of a very oppressed figure.

Did you want to see me broken? Bowed head and lowered eyes? Shoulders falling down like teardrops,

Weakened by my soulful cries? (Lines 13-16)

The words “broken,” “bowed,” “lowered,” “falling,” and “weakened” show the historical image of a slave. African Americans were treated worse than animals. The picture made with these images is that of the very lowly human being who is at the mercy of the oppressor. However, the very next stanza shows the defiance, as if she has risen from the ashes like a sphinx. She interrogates the oppressor to ask that her pride may offend him, as she is pretending to have gold mines. The sixth stanza may seem a challenge after this because it again addresses the oppressor with the second person “you” that points to her courage after this show of defiance. The seventh stanza repeats almost similar rhetorical questions but the stress is upon “sexiness” (Line 25) and gender attributes that are supposed to have empowered Maya Angelou. Then the eighth and ninth stanzas repeat the past and point to the future of “I rise” defiance. There is a hope in the end. This shows that Maya Angelou has been hopeful about her bright future.

This succinct analysis shows that Maya Angelou not only shows defiance but also derides her oppressors and exerts her feminine side that she thinks is powerful and strong. A further analysis by Andrew Spacey and Gary Hess, also pointed out the same meanings of the poem.

According to the analysis of Andrew Spacey on *Owlcation*, the very structure of the poem highlighted the “mantra fashion” (Spacey). He was of the view that this mantra aimed to target the oppressors to realize how they were treating their subjects differently. The structural pattern of the rhyme scheme, he argued, is enough to point out its sculptural image that he says seem to have “granite plinth to stand on” (Spacey). Spacey’s view about the poem is based on the images and the loudness that the words evince in the face of circumstantial oppression through which the poet must have gone in the past. The elements of nature enumerated in the poem also intended to raise hopes of the poet, Andrew Spacey said, adding that this leads to “defiance” in the poem about the poetic expression (Spacey).

This defiance of the speaker or the poet starts from the very first stanza, a quatrain, which highlights the second person “You” as Spacey also pointed out in his analysis (Spacey). This “You” is directly addressing the oppressor, or the white patriarchy, or white authority to make it realize that the woman in question can still rise up even if she is oppressed more. Her defiance continues in the



second stanza with the rhetorical question of “Does my sassiness upset you?” which points to another question about the “gloom” that has beset the oppressor on account of her gait of pride.

By including the elements of nature in the third stanza, she clarifies to the oppressor who happens to be her target audience that even the nature is with her, as it is a natural thing that she should be treated equal to the oppressor. Angelou then goes on to question in the fourth stanza to inquire of the oppressor what he wants from her by keeping her subjugated and bowed down. The same strain of rhetorical question continues in the sixth stanza with the same reference to wealth but then suddenly Maya Angelou turns to her oppressor with the same second person “You” to state that he can do whatever he wants. He can shoot her with words or cut with eyes or subject her to hatred, but she is destined to rise again. Until now, it has been her sassiness that she has stated in the first line of the second stanza, but now in this seventh stanza it turns out “sexiness” (Line 25).

Does my sexiness upset you? Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs? (Lines 25-29)

All four lines of this stanza hint to Angelou's gender. Sexiness is a certain feminine quality of attracting the opposite sex. The first reference may point to bodily attraction, but the second is of her sexual quality. Both of these natural attributes combine to give her power and strength; or in other words, this becomes a gender empowerment in Maya Angelou. Spacey rightly pointed out in his analysis, referring to the earlier sassiness and interlinking with this sexiness to argue that “The word *sassiness* suggests an arrogant self-confidence, backed up by the use of *haughtiness*, and *sexiness*. The poet's use of hyperbole with these three nouns adds a kind of absurd beauty” (Spacey). It continues in the next two stanzas.

In the eighth stanza, she describes the history of slavery and racial discrimination where the poem comes back to her race. The constant strain of refrain “I rise” continues in this stanza and repeated twice after every assertion that she has suffered historical shame of racial discrimination and subsequent pain of this discrimination. Commenting on the sixth stanza, Spacey said that she has come to the climax to speak about the oppression (Spacey). On the other hand, Gary Hess who taught English in Southeast Asia, argued in his analysis that these two last stanzas speak about “the history of the African-Americans through slavery and how horrible it was.”

The last stanza points out how she has started afresh after leaving everything behind. Four commentary lines interspersed with the refrain of “I rise” repeated five times add to the sense of empowerment among the readers of the poem. Although the first line of the stanza refers to the past, the third line refers to the hopeful and bright future leading to the 39th and 40th lines that show her pride over her heritage and the dream of the future that she is going to have. The three times repeated “I rise” affirm to her defiance that she has started in the beginning of the poem.

However, the very title of the poem “Phenomenal Woman” is an indicator of Angelou's self love as well as the realization of her empowerment as a woman. She is not an ordinary woman but a “phenomenal” one:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies. I say,
It's in the reach of my arms, The span of my hips,
The stride of my step, The curl of my lips. I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman, That's me. (Lines 1-13)

Structurally, the poem comprises four long stanzas with no regular number of lines, as all



four stanzas have a different number of lines. However, sometimes they rhyme with each other without any regular rhyme scheme. What makes the poem distinct is that it is written in colloquial form where Angelou tells what the white and other women ask her, and how she responds to them.

Although the poem *Equality* reverberates with racial discrimination, victimization and its impacts on the poet, it also gives a sign that she is a female and that she wants to be recognized. However, this could be a realization of her gender but within the poem *Equality* it seems that she wants her identity recognition as it says:

You announce my ways are wanton, that I fly from man to man,
but if I'm just a shadow to you,
could you ever understand. (Lines 11-14)

These lines from the poem "Equality" clearly show that Angelou realized that she was a black woman, but this is not what she had stated in earlier poems such as "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman." Angelou mentions her realization of the power she has had as a female, but this stanza marks a complete difference. The gender realization is clear in the second line of this stanza which stands out from the rest and tells the past of Maya Angelou, but she reiterates this in the third and fourth lines that she is just a "shadow to you" (Line 12) which is a reference to white man or white cultural construct. This is in stark contrast to her prose of "In All Ways a Woman" which gives a full glimpse of being a woman that means to "become and remain woman." ("In All Ways a Woman").

However, another poem, "Ain't That Bad?" when compared to both of them shows how Maya Angelou has discussed men as their necessary counterparts in the fight against slavery. This poem has a total ten stanzas: The first four stanzas have four lines; the fifth and tenth stanzas have seven lines each with a certain interrogative refrain, while the rest are the same that are called quatrains or four-lined stanzas such as given below which has seven lines and has two refrains.

Now ain't they bad?
An ain't they Black?
An ain't they Black?
An' ain't they Bad?
An ain't they bad?
An' ain't they Black?
An' ain't they fine? ("Ain't That Bad?" Lines 17-23)

Commenting on the same poem, Anne H. Charity Hudley, a professor of Community Studies at the College of William and Mary, argued that such poems give the reader a sense: "Angelou gave us the language and the courage to tell our stories" she argues adding that she "sounded like my grandmother" (Hudley).

Although the next two stanzas have rather long lines, they speak about her racial heritage and not about the feminism or patriarchy. However, immediately after this are two quatrains or four-lined stanzas, and both contain references to African-American icons such as:

Arthur Ashe on the tennis court
Mohammed Ali in the ring
Andre Watts and Andrew Young
Black men doing their thing. (Lines 32-36)

The same is the case of other two major poems "Human Family" and "Equality" which are concerned more with racial segregation and the condition or plight of African American men rather than women. In the same tone, Angelou states "but I've not seen any two / who really were the same" (Lines 20-21).

In "Equality," the main idea is not upon men or women but on "we," or race and not women or men in particular. It means that she has given equal significance to both men as well as women of



her race but have thought it better to be in collectivity with themen as her use of first person plural shows.

Conclusion

In brief, both of these poems “Still I Rise” and “Phenomenal Woman,” when put into contrast with other poems, seem to be full of the realization of the power that comes with being a female and how to manipulate and exploit of this power to her own ends. The other poems are set in contrast with these poems. They further accentuate this realization of the powers of being from the opposite gender when contrasted with the same power the men have. This has happened due to her being from the marginalized community of African Americans where even men were enslaved with their women, and both have struggled hard to win equal rights. According to Maya Angelou and a representative of her culture, D. U. Juan concluded in his article, “Interpretation of Black Culture by Maya Angelou through Music Poetry” that “With the right choice of imaginative words and phrases and musical styles, she interprets black culture and promotes the thinking of a race’s past, present and future” (84).

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