

Article

Transcending Black Aesthetics: A Panoramic Perception of Select Poems of Maya Angelou **Journal of Development Economics and Management Research Studies (JDMS)** 03(03), 47-51, January-March, 2020
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Dr.Subthra Devi¹**ABSTRACT**

African American Literature has emerged as a formidable body of writing today. It was ignited by a young slave girl Phillis Wheatley, nurtured by nationalist writers like Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, and others, was taken to its pinnacle by Maya Angelou who has turned into an icon of America. A multi-faceted writer, Angelou has to her credit seven autobiographies, ten collections of poems, three collections of essays, a covetable list of movies and television shows spanning over 50 years. Harlem Renaissance and Black Aesthetic Movement played a vital role in the affirmation of black identity. Like all other black writers Maya Angelou also begins her poetic career with protest writing, recording her righteous anger against racial discrimination and the adversities of white domination in the American society. However, as she evolved as a human and a poet, she expanded her vision beyond the barriers of black and white and started envisioning a bright and peaceful world for the entire human race. This paper attempts to trace the evolution of Maya Angelou as a poet and read how she transcends Black Aesthetics and becomes a magnificent Black teaching Aesthetics to humanity.

Keywords: African American Writing, Maya Angelou, Harlem Renaissance, Black Aesthetic Movement, On the Pulse of the Morning.

African American poetry is the free, liberated daughter, born of a slave mother, Phillis Wheatley. The adolescent slave girl had to face a panel of eighteen of Boston's most notable citizens headed by his Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the colony for an oral examination to be certified the authorship of her poems. When her collection, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral was published in the fall of 1773 with the letter of 'Attestation' addressed to 'the Publick' printed as the prefatory message, Phillis Wheatley became not only the first African American to publish a book, but also the first black to achieve an international reputation as a writer.

The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (Gates 1997) in its preface, points out to the contribution of Africans to the rich treasure trove of American Literature thus: In the stubbornly durable history of human slavery, it was only the black slaves in England and the United States who created a genre of literature that, at once, testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge to be free and literate, to embrace the European Enlightenment's dream of reason and the American Enlightenment's dream of civil liberty, wedded together gloriously in a great republic of letters. (Gates, xxvii)

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At the turn of the twentieth century, African American Literature reached a prestigious status and was considered an integral part of American Literature, for it focused on the role of African American writers in the larger American society and their attempt to discover “what it means to be an American” (Coon 32). Prof. Albert J. Raboteau rightly says that the presence of African Americans “has always been a test case of the nation’s claims to freedom, democracy, equality, the inclusiveness of all” (32).

The Harlem Renaissance spanning the 1920s could be described as an explosion of black cultural awareness that found its voice in various artistic expressions such as poetry, fiction, music, theatre, painting, and sculpture. It highlighted the will of the blacks explicitly to implicitly adopt an aesthetic that concerned the socio-political experience and served as a form of resistance and a social rejection of racism. The term ‘Black Aesthetic’ was coined by Hoyt Fuller and the movement had its history rooted in the political climate of social change in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Black Aesthetic writings were confrontational, calculated to shock and awaken readers to the political concerns of Black Americans. It identified with radical politics and courted controversy and had the following political concerns like the fight against poverty, famine, and political oppression. It described the agitated flight of an intensely self-conscious Afro-American artist from neo-slavery of blinding, neutralizing whiteness. The role of violent action in achieving political change was more prominent in these writings. Amiri Baraka endorses the tenets of the movement in the mid-1960s.

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD. (Baraka 389)

The movement underscored the role of music in black life and traced black music from slavery to contemporary jazz. It instructed Black American artists to follow “black,” not “white” standards of beauty, value and stop looking into the white culture for validation. The focus of the movement was not only to encourage the whites to notice black art, but to change the perceptions of how Afro-Americans saw themselves and how white Americans viewed Afro-American works of art. The impact of the movement was the realization that black is beautiful and Afro-American culture was legitimized.

All my work, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith. While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated – Maya Angelou (McPherson 10).

Maya Angelou, an icon of American Literature, defines thus the struggle and humiliation experienced by her race and vouchsafes her indomitable spirit. An acclaimed poet, autobiographer and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou is adjudged the best writer, editor, essayist and playwright of the century. She believed that there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story in one’s heart, and hence needed seven autobiographies to chronicle in detail, various eras of her life. As a prolific poet, she has to her credit ten collections of poems, with

Just Give me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diiie setting her poetic ball rolling in 1971 and Poetry for Young People marking the culmination of her poetic journey in 2007. However the journey was extended with two poems, “We Had Him”, a tribute to Michael Jackson in 2009, read by Queen Latifah at his funeral and “His Day is Done”, a farewell poem to Nelson Mandela in 2013, on his death. Having served on two Presidential Committees, Angelou was awarded the presidential Medal of Arts in 2000, the Lincoln Medal in 2008 and three Grammy Awards. Fifty honorary degrees came her way as tributes to her soul stirring poems that heal the hearts

and liberate the minds of Americans. She had a unique honour paid by Sterling Publishing who have placed 25 of her poems in a volume, Poetry for Young People series in 2004. She is celebrated as “the black woman’s poet laureate” and all her poems are treated as “the anthems of African Americans”(Washington 56)

Her poem “My Guilt” agonises over families split and enslaved and records her sense of guilt,
 My guilt is “slavery’s chain,” too long
 The clang of iron falls down the years.
 This brother’s sold, this sister’s gone
 In bitter wax, lining my ears.
 My guilt made music with tears.

She cries over the unfortunate demise of her heroic accomplices, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Jr when she wails:

My crime is heroes dead and gone

 My crime is I am alive to tell (CCP 45)

The eighteen poems in Just before the World Ends outgrow this wailing and, with righteous anger, focus on the survival and the strength of the blacks despite living in a white dominant society.

These poems are more militant in tone and with a sense of pride commend the survivors who have prevailed, despite racism and its challenges. The significant lines from the poem “Harlem Hopscotch,”

If you are white, all right
 If you are brown, hang around

If you are black, stand back have turned into a popular jingle of African Americans. Angelou literally ridicules the whites and their prejudice against God-given complexion. The first person singular pronoun ‘I’ Maya Angelou uses to refer to her entire race, is described by African American Professor of Literature, Priscilla R. Ramey as “a self-defining function” in which Angelou ironically views the world as an outsider, resulting in the loss of her literal relationship to the world and enabling her to laugh at its characteristics which are politically and socially devastating.

The poems in And Still I Rise proclaim her determination to rise above difficulty and demotivation. With a confident voice of strength that recognises its own power, she refuses to be pushed into anonymity and passivity. The title poem is a reservoir of moral strength. She ascertains,

You may write me down in history
 With your bitter, twisted lies

 Just like moons and like suns,
 With the certainty of tides,
 Just like hopes springing high,
 Still I’ll rise.

Despite racial adversity, the indomitable spirit of the blacks will triumph. They will, like a phoenix, rise up whenever oppressed and rise with new vigour. For those who understand the significance of repeated wrong doing, the poem becomes a kind of anthem and a beacon of hope. “Phenomenal Woman” is a signature poem of Maya Angelou and crosses the barriers of White and Black and talks loudly for and about the race of women. She breaks down all conventional stereotypes of woman, shatters all ideas of fashion and passionately

announces that self-knowledge and self-confidence is the power of every woman. The poem boasts that a woman is much more than the sum of her parts. She is enigmatic, yet magnetic in establishing that she is a phenomenon. She casts a spell over the male society and commands their respect and worship. Her inner strength will fetch her dignity. The poet relished reading this poem with a flourish in her tone and public reading sessions.

With the decisive voice of Themis, the goddess of counsel of law in Greek mythology, Maya Angelou denounces the administration of the super power, America and shatters to pieces all the illusions associated with American Dreams. She blames badly,

The gold of her promise has never been mined.
Her borders of justice
Not clearly defined.

She transcends her identity as a black woman and becomes a spokeswoman for all the races who inhabit the 'hot melting pot,' America. She points out how her corps of abundance/ have not fed the hungry. With least fear in her mind of political and legal actions, she lays bare the truth thither proud declarations are "leaves on the wind" and wails over the fact that she "entrap her children with legends untrue".

Angelou composed a remarkable poem for the 50th anniversary of the United States, "A Brave and Startling Truth" in 1995. Hailed as a global renaissance woman, she talks about three journeys of the people of this small and lovely planet,

Travelling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns.

Like a scientific philosopher, she expands her vision across borders and talks about three different types of journeys undertaken by human race - journeys through the cosmos, history and towards a better future, where something amazing awaits us. A brave and startling truth that changes man forever is the realisation that peace loving man is the greatest wonder of all. Angelou's overwhelming love and concern for her fellow beings is astounding. The society steeped on her sexual violence, shame and struggles right from her childhood. Yet, with a touch of divinity, she talks like a mother of the race of humans.

However, Maya Angelou's magnum opus is her all-encompassing poem "On the Pulse of the Morning" written for a prestigious occasion, the presidential inauguration of Bill Clinton in 1993. Robust Maya had the privilege of being the first woman and the second American to be invited by the President to honour the occasion with the reading of a poem. Eagerly watched by the entire world, in her sonorous voice and dramatic tone, Maya gave a universal message that resonates beyond the United States of America, an immortal message for humanity. The poem celebrates the science of similarity, connectedness and human solidarity. She lashes her whip on the indifference of humanity by making a rock, a river, a tree her speakers. The Rock announces that people may stand upon its back but may not find security in its shadow. The Rock encourages the Humans to face their future or "distant destiny," boldly and directly. The river invites people to rest on its bed, but only if they forego the study of war. If they come "clad in peace," this ageless body of water will sing the songs of unity and peace given to it by the Creator. The tree reminds people that each person is a "descendant of some passed -on traveler," and that each "has been paid for." These elements of Mother Nature entreat man to look back into darker times and push on forward into future, full of hope. Angelou touches upon history, lists out many native races across the globe and urges everyone to do his best and share the planet wisely, which is the need of the hour.

Like a visionary she proclaims that human beings should set aside their differences, change for the better, work in unison with nature, learn from the past and despite differences, accomplish great things together. Her phrase “We human beings are more alike than we are unlike” has attained the stature of a spiritual incantation to be adhered to by human beings all over the world. She wants them to mark a new beginning with a simple and sweet “Good Morning.”

Here on the pulse of this new day
 You may have the grace to look up and out
 And into your sister’s eyes,
 Into your brother’s face, your country
 And say simply
 Very simply
 With hope
 Good morning.

Maya Angelou transcends black aesthetics and becomes a black delivering an aesthetic message to the human race. Maya Angelou recorded her righteous anger against racial discrimination and the adversities of white domination. She evolved as a human and also a poet and expanded her vision beyond the barriers of black and white and started envisioning a bright and peaceful world.

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