

EMBODIMENT OF CAGED WOMEN IN MARGINALISED BLACK COMMUNITY: A STUDY ON MAYA ANGELOU'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Maya Angelou had often been identified with the "Caged Bird" of her poems. A victim of male patriarchal society and belonging to the racially, marginalised black community, her life had been one of pain; and suffering. Angelou's flair for poetry became her saving grace and gave her the much needed therapeutic support. According to Greek mythology, the Philomela or the nightingale is a song bird that sings of woes and anguish in full throated melody. As the legend goes this rather non-descript bird had been a beautiful girl by name, Philomela.

Keywords: Caged Bird, Male Patriarchal Society, Melody, Marginalised Black Community

INTRODUCTION

Philomela was the daughter of King Pandion of Athens. She had a sister Procne; who was married to Tereus, the son of King Ares of Daulis in Phocis. She bore Tereus a son, Itys. Tereus wished to marry his sister-in-law Philomela and so he concealed Procne in the country and told Philomela, she was dead. Then having married Philomela, he cut out her tongue (according to other versions of the myth, he raped Philomela and did not marry her). Philomela however, soon learned the truth and made it known to her sister by a few words woven in to a garment. Procne thereupon slew Itys and served his flesh to Tereus. The sisters fled, pursued by Tereus. They appealed to the Gods and their prayer was heard. According to Ovid's *Metamorphosis* 565, Procne became the swallow, Philomela the nightingale and Tereus a hawk.

The nightingale therefore came to symbolise women who had undergone similar situations in life. Angelou too experienced a transformation from Philomela to the nightingale as a result of bitter incidents in her life. The story of Angelou can be summed up in the words of June Jordan, "I am the history of rape/I am the history of the rejection of who I am/I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of myself" (qtd. in Nair 24). Angelou's songs about herself are a celebration of freedom of speech, after a period of self-inflicted incarceration and isolation. This was due to her rape at the age of seven by her mother's boyfriend, Freeman while she was living in St. Louis. This violent incident made her decide that she ". . . had to stop talking" (qtd. in Gale 6).

After the cruel rape that was perpetrated on her isolated her from people, Angelou was overcome by guilt. This was because she had in fact allowed Freeman to fondle her on two earlier occasions. The search for love and happiness in the child who knew no better, made her yield to the advances of her mother's lover because at that age she couldn't,

. . . tell fact from fiction
or if my dream was true,
The only sure prediction
in this whole world was you.
I'd touched your features inchily,
heard love and dared the cost.

The scented spiel reeled me unreal
and found my senses lost. (“Senses of Insecurity” 1-8)

Freeman took advantage of the young girl and later when an opportunity arose, molested her sexually. Angelou was forced to undergo a rape trial that left her senses and sensibility totally wounded. It took nearly five years for her to come out of this void and voice her anguish, and then like a dam that was breached, she found expression in a spontaneous outpouring of subjective and emotional poetry.

It was only during the trial, the little girl, realised the enormity of her rape and that her trust had been betrayed by the man she wanted to love as a father. Angelou’s mind and body suffered excruciating pain. The rape was not yet over for her as she had to confront society in the courtroom. The defendant’s lawyer tried to put the blame on her. The innocent girl unable to perceive things in their proper light became convinced that she was somehow responsible for the rape. She says how “I didn’t want to lie, but the lawyer wouldn’t let me think. . . .” (qtd. in Lionnet 148).

Angelou had no choice left but to lie for survival’s sake, to keep repressed the truth of her earlier encouragement of Freeman’s sexual attention. So, on the familial and social level the rapist was punished and justice was done. She felt that she had deceived the people present in the trial room with her unreliable words. In her poem “How I Can Lie to You”, she brings back the emotions she felt at that time.

now thread my voice
with lies
of lightness
force within
my mirror eyes
the cold disguise
of sad and wise
decisions. (1-8)

As mentioned earlier this bitter experience, deprived her of her power of speech and, “. . . so I used silence as a retreat” (qtd. in Lionel 148). Like Philomela her tongue was cut off (metaphorically of course) through the power of a cruel man. In one of her poems “Remembering”, she goes back to the trial and speaks of herself as being, “. . . in stolid hopelessness/[when] . . . they [laid] my soul in strips” (7-8). In the court Angelou had felt like a robot and had no idea of what was going on inside her and out in the world. Her poem “In a Time” shows how, “Left knows not what right is doing/My heart is torn asunder” (3-4). She found in this critical state, that it was difficult to discriminate between good and bad. Her mind was loaded with a baggage of guilt. Angelou’s lie in the court forced Freeman to endure pain and death through the assault of a gang led by her uncle. This was the cause for the lines of her poem “The Lie”,

Tears, copious as a spring rain,
are checked in ducts
and screams are crowded in a corner
of my throat.
You are leaving?
.....
When I return, I know you’ll be gone. (9-17)

Revenge was Taken on Freeman

Revenge was taken on Freeman because Angelou had confided in her brother Bailey, who betrayed her confidence. In the poem “Kin”, Angelou talks about her silent walks with Bailey on the,

Southern woods and long talks
In low voices

Shielding meaning from the big ears
Of overcurious adults. (18-21)

My Life Has Turned to Blue

Angelou always regretted the revenge taken on Freeman. In another of her poems, “My Life Has Turned to Blue” Angelou groans with pain at his murder. She like a nightingale sadly sings of how,

Red robin’s gone,
down to the South he flew.
Left here alone,
my life has turned to blue. (9-12)

The trauma of childhood bitterness, loneliness and sleeplessness she experienced became the theme of some of her poetic works. Angelou’s agony over the rape, left her frustrated and devastated, and made her search for a way out of her lonely nights. She became an insomniac and in her poem “Insomniac” she reveals how, “sleep plays coy,/aloof and disdainful” (2-3). At night, Angelou’s silence and her inner conflict crystallised and merged her persona with that of the brown/black plumed bird the nightingale.

During her lonely sleepless nights, hidden secrets emerged from her sub-conscious to haunt her like ghosts and it was only sheer courage and determination that became her strength, lifting her out from the abyss of her past. In Angelou’s poem “Alone” she speaks of,

Lying, thinking
.....
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don’t believe I’m wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone. (1-10)

The Traveler

The thought of being left alone with no comfort or support from family and friends is again repeated in her poem “The Traveler” where she says “This is my torture/My long nights, lone” (7-8). Perhaps all this bitterness and anguish frothed within her, creating her enormous obsession with death. In her poem “Mourning Grace”, Angelou presents death as an escape from all the problems of the world. She however has doubts whether there will be anyone to pity her or mourn for her when she dies.

If today I follow death,
.....
Will you
have
the
grace
to mourn for
me? (1-14)

In another of her poems “The Detached”, the oppressed poet speaks of how,

We die,
Welcoming Bluebeards to our darkening closets,
Stranglers to our outstretched necks,

Stranglers, who neither care nor
 care to know that
 DEATH IS INTERNAL. (1-6)

Caged Bird

Sifting through her thoughts of guilt and suffering and trying to find an outlet in death as a cessation of pain, she lived only internally. Externally she was only a benumbed element of the oppressive system that controlled her life, until the discovery of literature allowed her to weave her own story. It was clear from her own remarks that Angelou identified herself with Philomela and she created this ‘isolated’ identity that was imaginary in order to endure the thoughts of rape and all the injustice she felt as a young black girl in the South. The bird imagery in her poem “Caged Bird” allied with the chirpy and rushing music in it seemed to show how sound was related to silence in Angelou’s response to myriad situations.

Angelou’s silence was not in keeping with the bustle of St. Louis where she went after the trial. The town was filled with the sound of trucks and roaring buses all day and even at night. In fact, Angelou’s silence was more in tune with her hometown Stamps, to which she returned later, after a long gap. This was a beautiful place with obscure lanes and lonely bungalows, a place where nothing ever happened. It was the kind of cocoon in which she kept herself safe from outside world.

Her petrified silence was also a response to other difficult situations besides the rape, which ranged from love, surprise and shock, to unwillingness to reply, down right disagreement and response to fear. It ultimately was sought after as a method of survival. In one of her poems “Phenomenal Woman”, Angelou described in detail about her being a woman who stood apart from her gender and from her race. She created this alternate identity that was rooted in literature to see herself, as separate and unique from the racially biased society in which she lived. As for her gender consciousness, Angelou realized that to be proud of one’s female appearance was a welcome gesture in any patriarchal society. She speaks of how,

Men themselves have wondered
 What they see in me.
 They try so much
 But they can’t touch
 My inner mystery.

 Now you understand
 Just why my head’s not bowed

 ‘Cause I’m a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That’s me. (30-60)

The Mothering Blackness

Angelou’s emotional trauma also had an impact on her religious beliefs. In her constant childhood and adolescent suffering, Angelou internalized the religious teachings of her childhood and consequently perceived herself as evil. She felt that she had sold herself to the devil. The darkness of a cloistered room became her solace and in one of her poems “The Mothering Blackness” she tells of how,

She came home running
 back to the mothering blackness
 deep in the smothering blackness

White tears icicle gold. . . (1-4)

The feeling of having deceived God by her misbehaviour with Freeman affected her cruelly and made her flee from His spiritual presence. Angelou remembers this in her poem "Lord in My Heart". She tells how she had forgotten,

Bible lessons
 Sunday school

 Teachers of my
 early youth
 Taught forgiveness
 stressed the truth
 Here then is my
 Christian lack:
 If I'm struck then
 I'll strike back. (13-44)

Angelou's final liberation from her emotional turbulence and consequent silence came while she was staying in Stamps. She met Mrs. Flowers, a dark-skinned woman who became a nurturing figure like her grandmother. Her aristocratic demeanour and formal education made her an instant role model for the poet. Angelou herself reveals her attraction towards Flowers, and says how:

She appealed to me because she was like people I had never met personally. Like women in English novels who walked the moors (whatever they were) with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance. Like the women who sat in front of roaring fireplaces, drinking tea incessantly from silver trays full of scones and crumpets. Women who walked over the 'heath' and read morocco-bound books and had two last names divided by a hyphen. It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself. (qtd. in Giberson "Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice") (Angelou, 1994).

She became Angelou's saviour, a sort of tribal deity who helped her re-evaluate her position within the community, as well as its virtues. Mrs. Flowers helped her overcome her bitter past and to compromise with society and people around her. Angelou in her poem "Forgive" makes a request to Flowers to lift her off from the burden of guilt carried from childhood.

. . . Take me on . . .
 loose your turban of flowers
 that peach petals and
 dogwood bloom may
 form epaulettes of white
 tenderness on my shoulders
 And round my
 head ringlets
 of forgiveness, poignant
 as rolled eyes, sad as summer
 Parasols in a hurricane.(10-20)

Angelou's speech was once again restored to her through Flowers' encouragement and through the delicious afternoons spent, reading and reciting great world literature. This reading caused her to enter in to a dialogue with Mrs. Flowers, there by developing a loving and nurturing intellectual relationship. She learnt from this aristocratic educated person, the importance of self-expression and communication that was necessary for her black race to survive. In her poem "Son to Mother" Angelou sought advice from her and says,

. . . tell me,
 What do you want me to say
 to them, just

before I annihilate
their ignorance? (19-23)

Flowers gave her right advice to voice her feelings through her poetry and according to Malendie Gaines, “The young Maya escaped emotional silence at the age . . . through poetry” (1). In the poem “A Conceit” Angelou wonders at the power of poetry. Poetry brought a glow in her life and guided other readers to “the privacy of/touching words” (7-8). In another of her poems “Wonder”, Angelou wonders,

Will I be less
dead because I wrote this
poem or you more because
you read it
long years hence. (10-14)

She pondered over the power of language that can make people pour out their inner soul and all its joys and torments without inhibition. Angelou was able to expose “. . . the most intimate details of her personal life. . . .” (Maya 65), through her ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’.

Another obstacle that curbed and troubled Angelou was racism. As a child, she was made to understand that whites were superior to blacks. In the 1930s while she was living in Stamps she often witnessed her grandmother, a property owner and store keeper, struck powerless in the presence of ‘white folks’. Her grandmother in her heart of hearts, rejected this theory of white supremacy and made sure that she raised Angelou and her brother with proper attitude regarding this. Angelou, while proud of her grandmother was also aware of her grandmother’s lower status in society because of her colour. The writer recalled some of the misfortunes that the whites brought on her and her family. She remembered incidents where her Uncle Willie, sometimes hid himself in the store’s potato bin, just to escape from the Ku Klux Klan. In her poem “Willie”, Angelou talks about this and says how,

Willie was a man without fame,
Hardly anybody knew his name.
Crippled and limping, always walking lame,
.....
Solitude was the climate in his head,
Emptiness was the partner in his bed,
Pain echoed in the steps of his tread,
.....
People called him “Uncle,” “Boy” and “Hey,”
Said, “You can’t live through this another day.”
.....
He said, “I’m living
.....
“You may enter my sleep, people my dreams,
Threaten my early morning’s ease,
But I keep comin’ followin’ laughin’ cryin’,
Sure as a summer breeze. (1-23)

The transforming magic of poetry caused Angelou to become a bold and courageous person. She was now ready to face any situation in her life. Like Philomela, who in her re-incarnation as a nightingale was able to sing her songs of woe, Angelou through her writing was able to portray black female experience. For the oppressed, the colonized and the exploited, the movement from silence to speech is not merely an attempt to insert selfhood in to history. It is a part of a political strategy for liberation. Her poem “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me” expresses how Angelou was not afraid of life, despite the ghosts from the past. She reveals how,

Shadows on the wall
Noises down the hall

Life doesn't frighten me at all
 Bad dogs barking loud
 Big ghosts in a cloud
 Life doesn't frighten me at all.

 I can walk the ocean floor
 And never have to breathe.
 Life doesn't frighten me at all. (1-41)

Angelou also described how she had to face problems and difficulties resulting from unemployment. Her mother Vivian motivated her daughter to take control of her life. With her advice Angelou took a step further and accepted a blue collar job as a means of livelihood. In one of her poems "Weekend Glory" she expressed the truth about how her,

. . . job at the plant
 ain't the biggest bet,
 but I pay my bills
 and stay out of debt. (17-20)

In another poem "Me and My Work", Angelou talked about a small job that helped her only to pay the rent on time. Angelou mentioned how she,

. . . got a piece of a job on the waterfront.
 Three days ain't hardly a grind.
 It buys some beans and collard greens
 and pays the rent on time. (1-4)

The demand for money and survival became so overpowering that she had to take up prostitution for her livelihood. In "Born That Way" Angelou mentions her change in to a prostitute,

Childhood whoring fitted her
 for deceit. Daddy had been a
 Fondler. . . .

 The neighbours and family friends
 whispered she was seen
 walking up and down the streets
 when she was seventeen.

 She just took for granted
 she was born that way. (7-22)

Her mother Vivian did not reject her even in this situation. Shange points out the comforting attitude of her mother, who said ". . . I'm here. Was there ever one time when you couldn't come home? Yes, darlin 'I know this isn't the way you wanted. But sweet heart, whoever you are is all. . . ." (qtd. in Uma "Unprivileged or Preferred" 76).

Later when Angelou became a cabaret dancer, she developed a relationship with her partner R. L. Poole. Angelou found that she was a human being capable of desires. By coming to terms with her sexuality, she as Alladi Uma says, not only questioned and challenged ". . . the authoritarian view of society regarding love, marriage and sex but also assert[ed] herself" ("Autobiography as Repression" 17) (Gale, 2006). Therefore, when she found her lover with another woman, Angelou found the courage to choose her own path apart from society's rules and traditional values. In the poem "Communication I" she bitterly stated how,

she walked into her room
 and frankly told her mother,
 "Of all he said, I understood
 he said he loved another." (19-22)

Patriarchal domination became the motif in her poem “Poor Girl”. Angelou showed in a feministic way how the phallus had become a powerful weapon against women, where men used their sexuality to win and discard the weaker sex. She presents this in harsh terms in depicting how the man she loved has got,

. . . another love
 and I know it
 Someone who adores you
 just like me

 You’re going to leave her too
 and I know it

 Then she’ll begin
 to sing this song
 Poor Girl
 Just like me. (1-30)

Angelou had a number of relationships and break-ups in her life. Her longing for love and affection proved to be the reason behind this. Angelou’s poem “Many and More”, talks of how,

There are many and more
 who would kiss my hand,
 taste my lips,
 to my loneliness lend
 their bodies’ warmth. (1-5)

The rejections she faced and her loneliness did not permit her to write about the usual subjects like melting snow, songs of birds or moonlit nights in her poetry. In her poem “Artful Pose”, Angelou talks about how her,

. . . Pencil halts
 and will not go
 along that quiet path.
 I need to write
 of lovers false
 and hate
 and hateful wrath
 quickly. (8 -15)

In the “Caged Bird”, she portrays herself as this caged bird whose wings are clipped and feet tied to the ground, unable to escape her rage against life and circumstances. In spite of the barriers of race and gender that clipped and tied down her personality, Angelou opens her throat and sings about herself, her gender, and her people like the nightingale. Through her poetry she brought comfort and motivation to the black people, singing in a voice rich and funny, passionate and mellow. She became a Moses figure showing her people that ahead were Canaan, the land of promise and freedom.

CONCLUSION

Angelou, the Philomel sums up her life in the poem “Thank You, Lord” thanking the almighty her creator, for her transformation from violated women to a mighty song bird.

I was once a sinner man,
 Living unsaved and wild,
 Taking my chances in a dangerous world,
 Putting my soul on trial.

Because of Your mercy,
Falling down on me like rain,
Because of Your mercy,
When I die I'll live again,
Let me humbly say,
Thank You for this day. (37- 46)

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Angelou creates a complex model of the self as an isolated individual both removed from and connected to the collective identity of the black community. She is thus able to overcome the forces in her life that threatened to silence her.

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