
Slave Hymns of Blacks in the Poems of Maya Angelou

Dr. G Danish S. Georshia*, & Dr.C. Bibin Sam

*Assistant Professor of English, Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil - 4

**Assistant Professor of English, Sivanthi Aditanar College, Pillayarapuram.

Slavery has been by far, the most horrible event in the history of The United States of America. It has been a shameful and unforgettable practice that had its ramifications in the very fabric of American culture. It deprived the black people of their past, their roots and their rich heritage. As a result of slavery, the blacks were forced to occupy positions as second class citizens and often deprived of their fundamental rights. Slavery began with the setting up of plantations in the American South. Africans were brought under force and torture by white slave traders to work on these plantations.

The loss of basic identity as human beings was unbearable for the black race. Bound in chains and fetters their lives changed forever. Joel Kovel in his illuminating study of *The Origin of Racism* says that the white master: “. . . first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanised his slave, made him quantifiable and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange” (qtd. in Murugan 28).

Angelou’s poetry is a struggle for national, racial and lingual identity. She brings out the dichotomy of black and white, femininity and masculinity, minor and major, self and other, inferiority and superiority, and orient and occident. The analysis of her poetry collections helps to fix her in the group of subversive writers questioning, dominance and subordination, dealing with themes like lost past and a deteriorated present in a cultural context against colonial forces.

Angelou’s poetry covers a wide range of topics like socio-psychological inferiority, desire for liberation, and anger against marginalization. This forms the major and recurring patterns of her poetry. Her writings reveal her engagement with the poetics of subversion that questions the dominance, power and hegemonic control of the centre and the black’s peripheral treatment. She examines the influence of the white’s culture on black traditions and values. Angelou like all of her race feels bitter about the institution of slavery and the effect of its subversion on the black people. Angelou in “Song for the Old Ones” brings out poignantly the sufferings of her forefathers, who had been former slaves,

My Fathers sit on benches
their flesh counts every plank
the slats leave dents of darkness
deep in their withered flanks.

.....
There in those pleated faces
I see the auction block
the chains and slavery’s coffles
the whip and lash and stock. (1-12)

History and literature have painted a bleak picture of slavery in North America and its after effects. From the early days of slavery, till the 1970's the lot of the blacks has been a very hard one. The pathetic picture of a black family that has been chained and shadowed by the system of slavery in America has been presented thus in *The Fiction of Alice Walker: A Study of Black Images*: "... the father, absent or unknown or possessing an identity to be mysteriously alluded to; the mother, denied access to her children or limited to infrequent and unsatisfying nocturnal visits; the son, sold early into a life of hard labour, the daughter, often victimised by the lust of the slave master or subjected to the caprice and spite of the women of the slave-masters family" (Murugan 28). Realising and reliving the plight of the black slave women, Angelou often brings out vividly their pathetic situation. She speaks of how deprived of monetary wages for their labour, the slave's only expectation was undisturbed rest at the end of the day. In one of her poems, "One More Round" a slave girl pathetically mourns, "There ain't no pay beneath the sun / As sweet as rest when a job's well done" (1-2).

Besides being unpaid, the black servants were not given basic respect. The old and faithful were not spared the rudeness of the whites including their children. In some of her poetry, Angelou groans with pain and rage over this inhuman attitude towards black race. In "When I Think About Myself", she speaks about the recollections of a sixty year old black woman. She remembers, "Sixty years in these folks' world, / The child I works for calls me girl, / I say "Yes Ma'am" for working's sake" (8-10). This old Mammy represents scores of other black servants, who share the same plight. Hard toil only brings them impertinence, lack of understanding and indifference to their pathetic situation and hardly any monetary gain. They have to appease themselves only with the bounties of nature. Angelou focuses on this theme of the burden of work on slave women in her moving poem "Woman Work",

I've got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
.....
The baby to dry
.....
The cane to be cut
.....
And the cotton to pick.
.....
Sun, rain, curving sky
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow
You're all that I can call my own. (1-30)

The ill-treatment meted out to the blacks in cotton and tobacco plantations are never questioned. Heavy lashes by leather strops, shame and humiliation haunt their nights. Angelou writes in "The Memory",

Cotton rows crisscross the world
And dead-tired nights of yearning
Thunderbolts on leather strops
And all my body burning
.....
Shame the blanket of my night
And all my days are dying. (1-8)

Blacks in America were humiliated also through various names that were attached to them down the ages-that brought out their inferiority in the eyes of the whites. Though European settlers express a view that Negroes “. . . were as much the children of God as whites and were not racially inferior. Yet, [they] expressed no qualms about enslaving them and engaging in a business that took a high death toll of the Africans” (Goodman and Gatell 89). Angelou hotly opposes this discrimination in the name of colour and race in America in the poem “The Calling of Names”.

He went to being called a colored man
after answering to “hey, nigger.”
.....
From colored man to Negro,
With the N in caps,
.....
From Negro in caps
to being a Jew.
.....
Now you’ll get hurt
if you don’t call him “Black.” (1-24)

In the above poem Angelou has echoed Fanon’s comment, “. . . the superficial difference is the body and voice, (skin, color, hair texture, body, shape, language, accent) are read as indelible signs of the natural inferiority of possessors; which is the sign of denigration” (qtd. in Ghani and Naz 102). However, amidst all this the poet points out that those blacks have the courage to stand up to injustices, war, and bloodshed with cheerful spirits. In “Why Are They Happy People?” Angelou seems to show how important it is to be happy in a world that tries hard to subjugate people. A former slave by name John Little says how at night “we would sing and dance and make others laugh at the rattling of our chains . . . We did it to keep down trouble, and to keep our hearts from being completely broken. . . .” (qtd. in Davis “Slavery in America”).

Angelou highlights the fact that there were also blacks so conditioned mentally by years of brain-washing who thought that their colour symbolised all that was bad. These people in other words longed to be white. In the poem “Ain’t That Bad” the poet brings out how darkness of colour is associated with evil and the negative things of life.

Now ain’t we bad?
An’ ain’t we Black?
An’ ain’t we Black?
An’ ain’t we bad? (40-43)

African American slave history also provides innumerable instances of innocent black women forced to bear the children of their white masters, who thought nothing of raping, molesting or sleeping with them, though they condemned their colour and their race. “Black women wrestled with the un-escapable horror of undergoing pregnancies that could only result in feeding more chattels into the rapacious man of slavery” (qtd. in Ghani and Naz 99). Even their half caste children were also treated as chattels by the white family and the father would claim no kinship or provide any form of support. In “Miss. Scarlet, Mr. Rhett and Other Latter-Day Saints”, Angelou talks of how the white master guards the relics of the black girl’s intact hymen:

daily putting to death,
in to eternity,
The stud, his seed,
His seed
His seed. (32-36)

The ordeals of slavery and the great pain and loss that blacks had to face when their children were taken away from them (even half caste white ones) caused them to plan escape to the Northern States of America and in to Canada where slavery was condemned. They chose the underground railroad as a means of fleeing from their masters. ‘Gender’ has become a sign of resistance in Afro-American poetry, because it has unified the concept of ‘black’ and ‘female’. Being black, Angelou has her own expression of political, social, psychological and sexual dynamics and oppression that has helped to shape her views and philosophy of life.

In the poem “Our Grandmothers” Angelou talks about a woman who flees from slavery through the underground railroad for the sake of her children. She recalls how iniquity has bound her to his bed. Her fleeing from it marks the end to compulsive love making. The children, who “sprouted like young weeds,” (57), find it difficult to survive under bondage. So the woman runs away unseen by her plantation owners. Angelou exposes in this poem the courage and determination of a black, slave girl to find a better life for her half-caste children. Her poem reveals the grace, this girl (symbolising black women) shows under the strain and pressure of her precarious escapade.

Angelou is proud that her people are now trying to overcome all their anguish with hope, perseverance and the spirit to fight till freedom comes. Her poems reverberate with the rhythms of a people who can still muster hope amidst suffering, who feel they can spring up from defeat and suppression with their determination and spirit of endurance. In short her poems speak of the grace that the blacks reveal under the pressure of social, political, and physical oppression. Angelou’s “GloryFalls” depicts the subject of rising hope in the promise of tomorrow despite the animosity of a biased world.

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