
Artistical Portrayal of Black Americans in Maya Angelou's Poem Still I Rise

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Maya Angelou is an inspirational poet who is universally acclaimed. She has the ability with her words, to cut through her race and class divide. Her poetry is elegant and fiery, her rhythms are captivating, her words moving and poignant, and her style rich in metaphor. She is able to reach the very soul of the reader through her poetry. Angelou's poetry is spiritually uplifting and full of hope. It is also extremely motivational. Angelou is an incredible force and one of the great voices of contemporary literature. She writes with humour and has the unique talent to reach out to humanity, with the liberating spirit ensconced in her words. Her writings reveal courage, outrage and pain. She does not use a lot of the technical form or devises of poetry, her most powerful weapon is, strength and ability to reach people. Her poetry is uplifting, easy to read and has a great rhythmical sense.

In her poems, Angelou has presented the experiences of African American women in the last half of the twentieth century. Her work is generally written from a gentle and accepting perspective with respect to the often harsh experience of blacks in America, rather than from an angry and revolutionary perspective. This is not to say that none of her poems express bitterness at racism and its personal and social effects. Angelou is generally capable of that rage and anger and has expressed it in her poems but her spiritual viewpoint makes her to try and find the best, with the situation in hand. Angelou's poems are 'softer' on racial issues than that of other writers like Langston Hughes.

Angelou memorised poetry at a young age. Whenever she wished to amuse herself, she would recall one of Shakespeare's sonnets from the memory. As a child, Angelou felt as if Shakespeare wrote only for her. She was inspired by the black American music, by the spirituals and gospels. The great influences of her life were music, black American literature and English literature. She has used poetry as a crutch and a skateboard and even as wings too.

The first poem in this list is Angelou's favourite "Still I Rise". The title itself, according to Angelou refers to the indomitable spirit of the black people. She often quotes this poem in interviews and also includes it in public readings. The poem follows Angelou's customary fashion of incremental repetition and catalogues injustices.

Angelou expresses unshakeable faith that one will overcome or triumph, and rise in spite of adversity, dire conditions and circumstances, in spite of racial epithets, scorn and hostility in white dominated situation. The lines remind people of the black spiritual song "Rise and Shine" as well as other religious hymns that provide hope as in this song: "Oh, rise and shine, and give God the glory, glory! / Rise and shine, and give God the glory, glory!" (qtd. in Hagen 128). "Still I Rise" is a protest poem that talks about the slavery, oppression, dreams and hopes of black slaves. The poem has nine stanzas of which the first seven are all four lines long and have a rhyming pattern of abcb, but the last two stanzas are longer and shows the significance of the

message portrayed in those stanzas. “Still I Rise” is an upbeat, defiant poem with an upbeat and fast rhythm.

Her first stanza makes use of similes to convey the truth of how blacks were treated badly by the white people. Angelou says how “You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I’ll rise” (3-4). The term ‘treated like dirt’ is a common phrase that most people are familiar with. Angelou has related this phrase to the sentiment of how it feels on a personal level to be treated with contempt on a daily basis. Here Angelou refers to words like ‘You may’ rather than ‘you have’, which turns the sentence in to a more positive statement. This particular word ‘dirt’ may also address the colour of a person. Like dust, also has an interesting meaning at the core of the sentence. When people try to clean away the dust, it gets everywhere, covers everything and finally after getting rid of it, the dust re-settles once again.

In stanza two Angelou asks a question: “Does my sassiness upset you?” (5), which at that time would have affected white people because blacks were supposed to be submissive, with no real personality feelings or emotions. She also says, “Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells / Pumping in my living room” (7-8). Angelou writes this to show that she is a proud and confident person and will challenge anyone who tries to put her down. Her metaphors “Just like moons and like suns,” (9) shows how sun and moon, two great powerful creations has the ability to rise above everything. She uses them to tell the reader that no matter what happens she can also rise like them above painful and dire circumstances. In stanza six Angelou uses personification:

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise. (21-24)

She mentions in this particular stanza, the cruelty perpetrated on blacks by white people, and about what they thought of them. At the end she brings the natural element air, and pictures how she can rise above it. In stanza seven she again questions: “Does my sexiness upset you? / Does it come as a surprise” (25-26). Even though there has been slavery in her past, she is aware and proud of her gender and sexuality. Why should white people be surprised that she can feel sexy? These rhetorical questions posed by Angelou shows how she is not only fighting the battle against black oppression but is also struggling with feminism and the fact that she is black and female. In the last two stanzas Angelou talks about all things she is leaving behind and the things she wants to achieve, after every line she also repeats the words “I rise” (30).

Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise
I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise. (29-43)

But ultimately in this poem, Angelou challenges the readers to fight against the dull invitation of death and destruction. Throughout the poem “Still I Rise” there is a strong, steady rhythm of her poetic voice that beckons to those who want to go beyond the level of demoralising defeat and to grasp life on its own terms. The strongest affirmation of life is seen here and in the face of “bitter, twisted lies,” (2), ‘hatefulness’ and ‘history’s shame’, the poet promises not to surrender. Silently, she absorbs the power of the sun and the moon and becomes a ‘black ocean’ that is ‘welling and swelling’ with the tide. Her inner resources such as, ‘oil wells’, ‘gold mines’ and ‘diamonds’, nourish her strength and sustain her courage. Her spirit will soar as she transforms the ‘gifts of her ancestors’ in to poetry, and herself in to ‘dream and hope of a slave’. Through her verse, Angelou reaches out to touch the lives of others and to offer hope and confidence in the place of humiliation and defeat.

The journey of Black Americans from the periphery to the centre is a remarkable experience, both in literal as well as metaphorical terms. Blacks realised the importance of changing their political, social and cultural position in the U.S. and strived towards it. This realisation is reflected in Langston Hughes statement, “. . . something has got to change in America – and change soon. We must help that change to come” (qtd. in Mascarenhas “The Road Long Travelled”). Such a realisation could take place only by challenging the hegemony of the mainstream and as a result modern black warriors engaged in a long and bitter struggle led by great and passionate men like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. The most striking factor behind this long and difficult struggle was the unified and organised strength of the black people revealed in the civil rights movement from 1950 - 70. Other events that supported their struggle were Black Power Movement and Black Arts Movement, which stood for racial dignity as well as freedom from white authority.

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