

***STILL I RISE* BY MAYA ANGELOU: A POWERFUL POSTCOLONIAL, FEMINIST, UNIVERSAL, TIMELESS POEM OF RESISTANCE**

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ABSTRACT

The current article analyses the poem *Still I Rise*, by the African-American woman poet Maya Angelou. Undertaken from a postcolonial feminist angle, the study aims at showing how the poet handles the themes of oppression, pride resistance and victory through common poetic devices. The study also shows that even though the poem is about the oppression of the African-American woman, it has a universal and timeless dimension. The findings reveal that the values that the poet celebrates are applicable to any context in which the oppressed person suffers from a systemic oppression.

Key words: postcolonial, feminist, oppression, pride, resistance, victory, African-American woman

INTRODUCTION

Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought (Collins Patricia Hill, 69).

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise. (Maya Angelou)

The above first quotation draws the reader's attention to Maya Angelou's feminist commitment, which is challenging the negative images associated with the Black woman in America. As far as the second quotation is concerned, it is the first stanza of the poem under analysis. The fact that the poem starts with this stanza stresses the significance and centrality of history and resistance to historical oppression in the piece. Indeed, history is central in postcolonial writings because postcolonialism is about history, its recording and interpretation according to the interpreter's agenda. The current study aims at analysing Maya Angelou's poem as a postcolonial feminist interpretation of historical oppression. The study also aims at showing that even though the poem is produced by an African-American woman, it has a universal and timeless dimension.

The dual postcolonial feminist angle is suitable to the study. In fact, according to Ashcroft, both theories

are articulated by resistance to dominant authoritarian and neo-

authoritarian orthodoxy and both speak from their position within the hegemonic language to subvert that language. But the most profound similarity is probably the extent to which both 'woman' and 'post-colonial' exist outside representation itself (Ashcroft, 23).

What Ashcroft stresses above is that being a woman and being postcolonial refer to being treated as an inferior other that undergoes systemic oppressions such as slavery, colonialism and their remnants, or patriarchal oppression. This observation is valid for all postcolonial communities. Thus, it is from the angle of the multiplicity or intersection of oppression, that the study will be conducted. In other words, the study will reveal how Angelou reflects the above-mentioned multiple oppression that she denounces in her poem *Still I Rise*.

Through the fight of the speaker, the poem can be symbolic of any fight against systemic oppression across the world, through universal struggle values yielded by the poem. In terms of methodology, the study relies on qualitative interpretation of the themes and poetic devices in the piece, to show how Angelou handles:

- the theme of oppression expressed in stanzas 1, 4, and 6;
- the theme of pride expressed in stanzas 2, 5, and 7;
- the themes of resistance and victory expressed in stanzas 3, 8, and 9.

Oppression in stanzas 1, 4 and 6.

Oppression as a theme is reflected in stanzas 1, 4 and 6. As stated above, historical oppression is the core theme of *Still I Rise*. It is the sub-theme of the first stanza which reads as follows:

You may write me down in history
 With your bitter, twisted lies,
 You may trod me in the very dirt
 But still, like dust, I'll rise.

In terms of poetic devices used by the poet, the whole stanza can be an end-stopped unit as it can be read as one powerful statement: You may write me down in history with your bitter and twisted lies, you may trod me down in the very dirt, but still, like dust, I'll rise. Starting the poem with the above stanza is highly significant because it is in reality the condensed essence of the whole poem. The speaker, who may be male or female in this stanza, is addressing an interlocutor, the oppressor who has written her/him down in history. What has been written about the speaker encompasses all the discrimination ideologies produced to validate the right of the oppressor to exercise his oppression on the speaker. The twisted lies in line 2 refers to the distorted history written to serve the goal of the oppressor. The speaker is warning us about thinking that history is an objective recording of what happened in the past. Angelou directly asserts that history, referred to as twisted lies, is tainted with the chosen color of its teller.

What does the phrase twisted lies encompass? The twisted lies include ideological and institutionalized racism which can be defined as:

“... a social practice that arbitrarily states that certain physical and cultural characteristics of people, peoples or societies are inferior. These are extended beliefs that enable those who

possess economic, political and social power to exclude, in different ways, people and peoples who possess such characteristics. It is important to highlight the concepts of “beliefs” and social “practices” when we talk about racism because, although the current state of scientific knowledge does not allow us to sustain the existence of “races” as human species diametrically different from each other, racism does exist as a social phenomenon, historically constructed and that retains full validity. (Orovio et. al, 129)

Among the concepts of beliefs built for the sake of oppression and exploitation, one can list all the constructed images associated with the black people in general and the black woman in particular. Patricia Hill Collins refers to the demeaning and constructed images about the black woman as “the “controlling images” that feed race, class and gender stereotypes and also constitute the “matrix of domination” that black women have to face on a daily basis in North America” (Collins, qt. in Orovio,14). These are the images that Angelou refers to when she talks about twisted lies of history. According to Ullah,

Phrases like "You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies" explicitly appeal to the historical falsification and manipulation of Black accounts, particularly by dominant historiographies that have distorted or omitted the voices of the subordinated. By alluding to the falsification of history, Angelou emphasizes the control power inherent in narrative control and the silencing of marginalized identities (Ullah, 1054).

Lines 2 and 4 of the first stanza – you may trod me in the very dirt - But still like dust, I'll rise – introduce the actual oppression undergone by the speaker and the latter's resistance. The troding in the very dirt is symbolic of all the illtreatment that the speaker's people have undergone at the hands of the various sytemic oppressions namely slavery, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, that many people continue to suffer from or from their remnants. This gives an international dimension to oppression.

Facing all these systems of oppression, there is the resistance and resilience of the speaker. The resistance is expressed through the powerful simile of the dust. Indeed, dust is mighty as it can destroy. The oppressor in his/her disdain considers the speaker as dirt (which is down). But the very dirt rises and becomes dust that might destroy the oppressor. The rhyming of lines 2 and 4 reinforces this idea by connecting the two lines in the following way: despite your twisted lies, I'll rise like dust. By comparing himself/herself to dust, the speaker is implying that s/he is stronger or at least s/he has a stronger will of resilience and resistance. Thus s/he cannot be won.

Stanza 4 deals with the consequences of the oppression that many oppressed people have undergone: being broken, having a bowed head, lowered eyes, weakened by sorrowful cries. The above description is not just what the oppressor desires, but it is a reality that oppressed people are bound to live. But faced with the harsh reality, the oppressed person is capable of resistance and that is the message that Angelou conveys: inspite of all adversities s/he stands still and will rise.

In stanza 6, the speaker's oppression comes in the form of strong metaphors: the oppressor's words that shoot, his eyes that cut and his hatred that kills. But facing all this, the speaker resists and rises like air. By using a simile, she compares herself to the air claiming to be stronger, unbeatable and indispensable just like air. Here again, by making line 2 and 4 rhyme, the poet links the ideas expressed in the two lines as follows: in spite of your eyes that cut, I will rise. The speaker can rise because she has two qualities that allow her to do so: pride and the capacity to resist in front of utmost adversity.

Pride in stanzas 2, 5, and 7.

Pride is the sub-theme of stanzas 2, 3, and 5. To be able to fight the oppressor, the oppressed person needs to be a proud fighter. To combat the twisted lies that come in the form of all the stereotypes at the service of racism and economic exploitation, Maya Angelou either subverts or inverts the created stereotypes. She also creates new images that reflect a proud resilient, resistant and combative sassy black woman.

For example, in stanza 2, the poet uses inversion to fight back the very system that has created the image of the sassy black woman. Inversion is a term coined by Anglo-American feminist critic Anette Kolodny. According to the critic, “inversion occurs when the stereotyped, traditional images of women . . . are being turned around in women’s fiction, either for comic purposes . . . to reveal their hidden reality or . . . come to connote their opposite” (Kolodny, qt. in Moi, 71). By inverting the notion of the sassy Black woman created by the racist system, Angelou makes it positive. The characteristic of being sassy is no longer demeaning for Angelou. She has made a positive appropriation of the term that has a double dimension, positive and negative. Positively, it can mean outspoken and direct and negatively it can mean disrespectful. Indeed, in the poem the term encompasses both aspects. Angelou shows that the speaker is outspoken and bold because she addresses directly her oppressor by saying in stanza 2:

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you beset with gloom?

'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells

Pumping in my living room.

The oppressor is beset with gloom, because the sassy woman is proud with her sassiness and that is why she walks as if she has gotten oil wells pumping in her livingroom. The hyperbole (oil wells) used in line 4 of stanza 2 is expressive of the pride of the woman, since oil wells are symbolic of universal wealth in the modern world. Just like in the first stanza, in the second one also, line 2 and 4 rhyme and the usage of the device creates a link between the ideas expressed in the the two lines as follows: the oppressor is beset with gloom because the speaker holds her head high as if she has oil wells in her room. This is the expression of utmost pride that the system denies the speaker.

Similarly to the sassiness, the haughtiness of the speaker, expressed in stanza 5, offends the oppressor. The speaker subverts the racist ideology that does not expect haughtiness from the oppressed. In fact, the Black woman is denied certain qualities associated to women. The speaker subverts this denial through her appropriation of happiness, haughtiness, wealth, and pride. She laughs as if she has her own gold mines. Just like in the previous stanzas, in this one also, line 2 and 4 rhyme and that connects and reinforces the meaning conveyed in the two lines: the oppressor takes it awfully hard that the speaker is like someone who has gold mines.

Does my haughtiness offend you?

Don't you take it awful hard

'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines

Diggin' in my own back yard.

With the lines of this stanza, the reader can picture a proud woman who walks and laughs with the certainty of final victory. The final assertion of the speaker’s womanhood comes in her sexiness, again a quality denied to the Black woman. In this stanza the reader can picture a sexy and proud

dancing woman who looks like a woman who has diamonds at the meeting of her thighs. The stanza is a claim of her womanhood which history has denied her through the twisted lies.

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?

In the above stanza too, Maya Angelou claims the right of the Black woman to the values of femininity denied to the Black woman. She claims to be a proud sexy woman who dances like she's got diamonds at the meeting of her thighs. Again, diamonds are symbolic of utmost wealth in the modern world. Discussing another poem by Angelou, Phenomenal Woman, Jayageetha argues that the poet claims that "the sexuality of a woman is not directly related to a pretty face. It is about how a woman feels within herself" (Jayageetha, 384). The speaker in *Still I Rise* feels proud and strong. That is why she can fight the systems and come out victorious.

Resistance and Victory in stanzas 3, 8, and 9

The themes of resistance and victory are expressed in the third, eighth and ninth stanzas. Stanza 3 is built on the usage of similes and metaphors, two powerful poetic devices. In the first line the speaker compares herself to moons and suns, and to the tides in line 2. These natural images convey the unbeatable character of the speaker because as Ullah rightly puts it, they convey resistance and spiritual power associated with the images (Ullah, 1054). The speaker is so proud that she becomes conscious of the certainty of her victory in front of all the adversity she has to endure. Thus, like suns, tides, hopes, she will rise as the poem asserts in these lines:

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I'll rise.

Stanzas 8 and 9 round up the poem as a summary of all the ideas expressed in the previous ones. In line one, history's shame refers to the twisted lies which represent the sub-theme of stanza 1. In line 2, the past that is rooted in pain, refers to painful past of slavery and colonialism or any systemic oppression of a given group across the world. The metaphors that follow express the strength, resistance, certainty, pride, and final success of the speaker. The latter becomes the wide and leaping ocean that bears in its tide the oppression that comes in the form of history's terror, fear and pain. The speaker's final victory allows her to leave history's shame and rise into daybreak that is wondrously clear. The victory brings the gifts of her ancestors. She finally becomes the dream and hope of all the oppressed people, the dream of the slave.

The refrain which is repeated three times to close the poem is the powerful assertion of the the victory of the oppressed, expressed in stanza 8. This final stanza which can be read like a speech, because like the other stanzas, it is composed in end-stopped lines or units that can be read like complete statements as follows:

- 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.

The last three lines when read as end-stopped lines, become a hammering of the same statement three times in the ears of the oppressor. Moreover, As Ullah points out,

The repetition of 'I rise' throughout the poem echoes the action of rising itself, imitating the physical and psychological action of rising from oppression, suffering, or defeat. The constant repetition asserts the speaker's unrelenting will in the midst of myriad adversities, whether individual, historical, or systemic (Ullah et al., 1051).

At the end of the poem, the reader pictures a proud and strong Black woman walking, dancing, and laughing. The image designed by Angelou is meant to fight all the preconceived misconceptions created by racism about Black womanhood. This is the Black feminism/womanism Maya engages in through her poem *Still I Rise*. In fact, Orovio rightly argues that:

Whether they are Africans, African-Americans or African-Caribbeans, black women are continuously affected by the myths perpetuated through patriarchal and imperial systems of domination. These misrepresentations have forged the way Western societies would systematically draw on stereotypical constructions of the black female as subaltern (Orovio, 143).

Thus, Maya Angelou engages in a postcolonial fight that seeks to destroy the negative stereotypes by creating new images of the Black woman such as that of the speaker of *Still I Rise*. But in producing *Still I Rise*, the poet's imagination has gone beyond her immediate environment because her poem is valid for any person who finds himself or herself in a systemic oppression. Manikam rightly states that the title of the poem "actually signifies both the ability to endure the torture of racism physically and mentality. (Manikam, 2). And that is the postcolonial, feminist, timeless and universal dimension of the poem because any person facing systemic oppression needs the capacity to endure all its forms physically, psychologically, and mentally.

Conclusion

Even though in "Heroic Ethnocentrism – The Idea of Universality in Literature", Charles Larson warns us about trying to force universality on cultural issues, some cultural values such as pride, resilience and resistance do have a timeless and universal dimension (Larson, 63-64). But that does not prevent them from retaining their cultural characteristics and application. The study has shown that although *Still I Rise* is about the proud African-American woman and her struggle against intersectional oppression, the values yielded throughout the lines are universal and timeless. They

can be valuable and useful in any systemic oppression. Angelou has conveyed this message in her mastery of poetic key devices such as metaphors, similes, end-stopped lines, and rhyming.

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