

Maya Angelou and Rita Dove: The Making of the Poetess

Dr. Sanjay Prasad Pandey

Professor

Department of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

Dr. Ajoy Batta

Professor

Department of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

Sai Krishna Prakasini Singh

Department of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab

Abstract

In the ultramodern era it is unbelievable to notice a gap in the society based on the skin colour. World is rapidly changing and moving ahead with new technologies and modernization of society. In America, one of the most developed countries of the world, there is still a sharp line between the black and the white. Renowned black poets like Maya Angelou and Rita Dove have highlighted their struggle among the white Americans. Through their poems they have raised their voice against social discrimination, cultural barrier, racial prejudice and political discourse. They used poem as a medium of expressing their battle for survival. Maya Angelou and Rita Dove were the voice of every African American. Their poems are celebrated as the anthem of African- American. Through their poems they aimed at bringing a revolutionary change in the life of blacks among the whites. Their poetry depicts the true picture of blacks.

Keywords: society, skin colour, change, survival, political discourse

Introduction

The African- American writing begins with the mistreatment of whites on the black as suppressed, unequal, underrated and dehumanizing. The movement like the revolutionary war, the civil war, the great depression, world war II, slavery and the civil right movement played a vital role in the life of every African- American. This was the turning point in the writers who wrote about their battle and endurance against the superior white Americans.

During the last part of twentieth century with the rise of black women writing this started a revolutionary movement in the lives of African-American. The main features of their writings revolve around the theme of skin colour and oppressed black suffering. The remarkable African- American authors includes Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, Alice Walker and many more who aimed through their writings to bring revolutionary changes in the society.

Racial bias and gender discrimination both impacted the life of black females. The black females were harassed both by black men and white Americans. American treated black women as slaves and treated them as animal. They were also called as "Others" by the white Americans. The female poets through their writings not only presented the individual rather raised their voice for the whole black female population.

Literature acts as a method of delivering feelings and thoughts. Among all forms of literature, poetry stands as the strong medium of communication between the feelings of speaker connecting the reader. Poetry is a form of sharing the internal feeling both on a surface level as well as inner deep level. Poetry puts a strong impact on the society which reveals the writers experience with a message for the reader. Autobiography has been used as a literary device for the articulation of sentiments and thoughts. Maya Angelou and Rita Dove were marked as contemporary poets who reflected the barrier between the oppressed white and suppressed black. Maya Angelou portrays the social political and the psychological barrier faced by the black African American whereas Rita Dove's concern was around the set of experiences, development of dreams and expectation of every African- American. Their poems stand as a voice of every African- American.

Maya Angelou

"Courage allows the successful women to fail and learn powerful lesson from the failure so that in the end, she didn't fail at all."
(Maya Angelou)

The voice of contemporary African- American literature, Hollywood's most memorable female black director, a civil right activist Marguerite Annie Johnson famous as Maya Angelou was born in St. Louis, Missouri (April 4, 1928-May 28, 2014). She has written seven famous autobiographies, three books of essays, and numerous numbers of poetry, plays, movies and television shows. Angelou through her writings reveals her victory upon the social obstruction and her fight to achieve equality in the society. Angelou has stated "I speak to the black experience but I am always talking about the human condition- about what can we endure, dream, fail and still survive."

Maya Angelou's father Bailey was a door keeper, and mother Vivian was a nurse. When her parents got separated Angelou and her brother went to stay with her parental grandmother. Later again moved back to their mother. While living with her mother Angelou was sexually molested and raped by her mother's boyfriend, Freeman. Maya told her brother about this incident and the man was sent to jail who was then killed by her uncle. This incident impacted so much that she muted herself for long five years at the age of 8. Her life could be described as an incredible journey from a muted girl to a revolutionary poet.

On the pulse of morning a renowned poem by Maya Angelou turned her to be a national poet. In 1993 Mrs Hilary Clinton gave her a chance to recite this poem at the presidential inauguration of Bill Clinton. Angelou received more than 50 honorary degrees.

Autobiographical poetry is the key element in the writing of Maya Angelou as revolutionary poet. Most of her poem deals with her personal life struggle in dealing with racism, identity discourse and survival among the white. When she overcame her muted period, Bertha Flower, her teacher helped her with the improvement of her writing skills. She encouraged her to write poems. So Angelou wrote poems to overcome her pain, sufferings, and discrimination.

Angelou epitomised the black females in her work. She exposes the life experience connected with black people. With the start of World War II, Maya started writing her poems which revolves around the rise and fall in her life. She was a prominent leader in the black female movement and also played a vital role in the civil rights movement. Maya not only raised voice for herself rather stand for every black.

'O pray my wings are gonna fit me well', is one of the famous autobiographical poems written by Maya Angelou. It contains 36 poems and is divided into 5 parts. This poem describes the versatility of a woman. The poem depicts upon the various problems she faced such as discrimination, inequality, subjugated and 'others' but at the end she won her battle and gained freedom. This collection truly pictures the problem faced by blacks during that time.

'Still, I rise', is another remarkable poem which represent the speaker as the voice of black community. The poem revolves around the marginalisation of black women and discrimination and injustice faced by the blacks. At the end she writes, "But still, like dust, I'll rise." It is a symbolic poem as in the first stanza 'Dirt' symbolises the blacks. The Americans treated the blacks as waste and dirt. This poem celebrates the confidence and the self-acknowledgement.

'Phenomenal Women' is a celebrated poem that identifies women to be superior. The speaker feels proud to be a woman. The poem revolves around the definition of the characteristic of building beautiful women. Angelou used two meanings- the first stands for the talented adjusting and powerful nature of women whereas the other meaning reveals women as incredible. She feels proud and lucky to be called as women. So she writes,

"Cause I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me."

In an interview with Alison Beard titled, "Life's Work: An Interview with Maya Angelou", Maya discussed her success as a storyteller, "seeing us as more alike than we are alike, then all stories are understandable." In the interview she frankly spoke of revealing the truth. She focuses on the true picture of the society. She adds that truth is not bitter always unless the writer presents it in such a way that the reader enjoys the truth. Writing poetry was the most challenging profession she had. Mr. Kirwin, a teacher in high school on San Francisco was her professional mentor. She had a huge influence on her life. On the question, "who have you mentored?" she replied almost "Everyone". She told that through her writing she has shared her feelings and thought, and her readers have learned something and have thought about it.

Oprah questioned about where she got her confidence. Angelou replied 'Love.' By love she doesn't mean romance, nor indulgence or sentimentality. Rather it mean the process which encourages human beings to dream of god. She adds her childhood journey where she muted herself for 6 years and that spiritual owner helped her to write. This is the one way she gained confidence about life. She also added that she represented history as an African -American woman and a part of black community. She wants to represent herself as a strong, kind and powerful lady. In the interview she said that she not only stood for herself rather she had the responsibility of the entire black community and especially the black women. She added that she is the child of god and god helped her to fight and get freedom.

Rita Dove

Rita Frances Dove (August 8, 1952) was born at Akron, Ohio. She is an American poet and writer. She was the first African-American to work as a poet Laureate of United States. She has been encouraged by her parents to study and this interest won her

the title the 'President Scholar'. She graduated from Miami University with BA in English in 1973. Studying creative writing at the University of Iowa helped her to publish several chapbooks of her own poetry in 1977. The poet Brenda Shaughnessy points out that "Dove is a master of transforming public or historical elements-reimagining a performance and discovering the original and frank private thoughts that these historical moments always contain."

Rita Dove is the second African -American to win the Pulitzer prize for poetry in 1987 for *Thomas and Beluah*. Now Dove is working as a commonwealth professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Dove has received numerous honours and awards like the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets, the Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities, a Common Wealth Award, and a National Humanities Medal.

'Rosa' a poem by Rita Dove is devoted to civil rights activist. The poem is about Rosa Parks. The background of the incident describes Rosa Parks. A black who had to give her seat to the white passenger but she refused to leave the seat. This leads to her arrest and this incident plays a vital role in the civil right movement. This poem is significant as it depicts the discrimination and inequality faced by the blacks.

'Parsley', is a poem describing the true incident of multiple butchering that took place in 1937 in dominical republic. The EI general ordered to murder people who could not pronounce the word parsley in Spanish' Perjil'.

The first volume of poetry by Rita Dove 'The Yellow House on the Corner' is a journey of her own life from a girl to a woman. This volume reflects the cultural clashes between European and American struggling for survival. Her poems are contemporary as well as historical at the same time. This volume is divided into five parts and each part describes the life and position of African American. Each part mainly focuses on the history mingled with the act of slavery imposed upon the blacks by the superior whites. To avoid slavery, she wants to run but she stepped back as she thought she was not fighting for herself rather for the black population. So she writes :

Ain't got a reason
to run away –
leastways, not one
would save my life.
So I scoop speculation
into a hopsack. (1-6) (The Slave's Critique of Practical Reason)

In an interview, Rita Dove with Steven Ratiner said , "Well, it really begins with two feelings I had as a child: first, that I wasn't represent in History- I'm talking about history with a capital H – neither as a female nor as a black person. And second, the nagging sense that ordinary people were not represented in history, that history gives you the tales of heroes, basically- and not what happens to 'ordinary' people who live through the events."

Conclusion

Maya Angelou and Rita Dove played a vital role in illuminating the barrier between the oppressed white and the suppressed blacks. They are the victims of the cultural hegemony. Their poems epitomised the voice of every African- American. Maya Angelou reflects the cultural, social, political and psychological discourse whereas Rita Dove focuses on the history, movements, dreams and hope of the African-Americans. They have brought a revolutionary change among the life of people.

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