

Voices of Resistance: A Comparative Study of Poems of Maya Angelou and Meena Kandasamy

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Abstract—The twentieth century was a period where societies evolved. It witnessed two parallel struggles against injustice and inhumanity. The first is the African American fight against racism and the second is the Dalit movement in India against caste system. Maya Angelou and Meena Kandasamy though oceans apart but united by oppression. They transformed their pain into art. They used poetry to portray their lived experiences. This paper compares the poems of Maya Angelou and Meena Kandasamy and studies their voices against injustice and inequality. Maya Angelou portrays in her poems the struggle faced by the Black people in America and especially black women and shows the courage of women. Meena Kandasamy is an Indian Dalit female poet who writes about the caste based violence and how the voices of Dalit women have been silenced by both society and patriarchy so much that even if they speak about their pain no one could hear the voice. With the help of poems of Angelou like ‘*Phenomenal Woman*’, and ‘*Caged Bird*’ and Kandasamy’s “*Touch*” this paper studies how both poets used poetry as a tool for expression. These women became the voices of resistance all over the world.

Introduction: Oppression has many voices, faces, language and colours. It speaks through the centuries of silence. It haunts those who are told they do not belong. These people are forced to be on the margins and made to believe that they are voiceless. And even if they dare to speak their voices don’t matter. But there are some strong voices that break the chains and become the verses of power. Two of the these strong voices belong to Maya Angelou and Meena Kandasamy. Maya Angelou is a Black writer and activist who fought for Black community in America and Meena Kandasamy is a Dalit woman who wrote bravely against the cast system in India. Though they come from two different parts of the world but their poems portray resistance. Both poets used stanzas as weapons but not to wound but to heal. They reminded the world that the silenced can speak too if you have the ear.

Angelou writes about black identity in the country where her ancestors were brought as slaves and sold as chattel

in the markets. They were treated like livestock with no dignity and respect. Kandasamy writes about the caste oppression. She comes from a country where women are worshipped during the day and tortured at night. She belonged to the nation which has the largest working population under 30 on the whole planet yet they listen to 75 year olds with 150 year old ideas of untouchability. She belonged to a nation where God can be found in trees and rivers but not in humanity. Both stand as the warriors with their words sharp.

Their poems are not soft but sharp and cut through injustice. Their works show that the pain is universal just like the desire to live a life of freedom. Although the race and caste system are completely different but deep down they share a common belief. Both the systems share one root that some lives are more valuable than others.

The aim of this research is to study how Oppression due to race, caste and gender is portrayed in the poems of Angelou and Kandasamy. By doing a comparative study of the selected poems of both the poets this paper will show how pain is transformed into power and silence into resilience. This paper also studies how both the poets challenge the patriarchal and hierarchical structures. By studying the selected poems of Angelou such as ‘*Phenomenal Woman*’, and ‘*Caged Bird*’ and Kandasamy’s selected poems from “*Touch*” this paper brings forth the pain of underprivileged women of the society

Index Terms—Meena Kandasamy, Maya Angelou, caste, race, gender, oppression, feminism, resistance.

I. ILLUSTRATION

Literature with its diverse forms has served a plethora of function in human civilization. Literature in has been vocal about human condition and its problems. It employs language for ‘writing back’, questioning norms, resisting atrocities and creating scope for change. Further, it can act as a vital tool to inculcate

empathy, defamiliarize reality, reflect on human nature and can also lead to social and political change. The autobiographies, essays, letters, memoirs, biographies and history of several revolutions reveal to us as to how literature shaped their thinking and influenced them to become an agent of change. Be it the influence of works of Tolstoy and Gita on Mahatma Gandhi, Chapman's "Homer on Keats", Walden W. B Yeats, The Sufison Doris Lessing, works of Fanon on Algerian revolution, works of Marx on Russian Revolution and Tripitaka on Dalit Movement in India literature has greatly contributed in shaping the history of the world.

A country like America whose foundation was laid on the belief of an ideal democracy slowly led a group to enslave the other, not only this they also justified the Jim Crow laws. This led the oppressed group to ask questions and assert their rights. They used literature to address these issues.

An acclaimed African American poet Maya Angelou remains an important voice within the category of protest poets. She joined the Harlem Writers Guild and her poetry addressed the issues on which the poets of Harlem Renaissance wrote i.e. social and political subjugation of the Black people. In addition to this, she also addressed the issue of patriarchal dominance existing for centuries.

Maya Angelou was born on 4th of April 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. Her real name was an Marguerite Annie Johnson. She was a poet, memoirist, singer, dancer, and civil rights activist. Her life and work profoundly impacted literature and social injustice. She was raised in racially segregated America. She faced early trauma. She was sexually abused which left her mute for nearly five years. During this time she developed love for literature. She found her solace in the poetry. Angelou started her career with performing as a singer and dancer. Her stage name 'Maya' was the nickname given by her brother.

Her poetry collections made her one of the most iconic literary figures of the 20th century. Her poetry is deeply resonant and explores themes of identity, empowerment and human spirit. Her works reflects her own life experiences as an African American Woman. Her poems resonates globally. They transcend barriers of race, gender, and culture.

"Phenomenal Woman"

In Phenomenal Woman Angelou described how black women face the attitudes of the people because of their

race, colour, and poor living conditions. For example, when Angelou said: "Pretty women wonder where my secret lies." (line 01) She says she doesn't fit in the beauty standards of the society yet her confidence and her acceptance of self radiates. Angelou has a concept of beauty in her mind and she said white women "pretty women" and she also said: "I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size."(line 02) In her poem Angelou also represents the irony in the way how the world perceives the beauty and how the poet thinks about the beauty. Such as Angelou said:

"But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies."

(Lines 03 and 04)

The American standard of beauty is to have sharp features, fair colour, blue eyes and blonde hair. But as an African-American woman Angelou was fat, black girl with kinky hair.

The poem also represents how Angelou is being treated by the society and it is showing her mental concepts and her reaction towards the beauty standards that exists in the minds of the white people. In this poem she also showed her reaction towards people and showed the way by which she challenged the society of white people. Angelou also represents in her poem that how other white women perceive her and how the society of white people considers her ugly and black but she remains confident with her huge body and black colour Angelou believes that the real beauty of a woman is her inner beauty and she feels confident in her huge physique and curvaceous body.

"It's in the reach of my arms The span of my hips,
The stride of my step, The curl of my lips."

(Lines 07 and 08)

In the final stanza she also shows how proud she is of herself. she doesn't need any validation from outside. She doesn't have to shout or yell to get the attention from the people. Her presence is enough. Her presence commands the respect and admiration. She's admired not for just outer beauty but for her inner charm, energy and vibe.

She repeats the lines

I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

(Lines 56 and 57)

These lines are the declarations of her triumphs. She asserts her feminine power. She shows her confidence

and selfhood. When she says “ I’m a woman” she doesn’t only assert her gender but she celebrates her essence of womanhood and defies the beauty standards. The repetition of these lines actually transforms the poem into a self empowering mantra. In these lines Angelou uses the word “Phenomenal” to manifest. To be Phenomenal is not just being impressive or remarkable in external way. But to embody a beauty that is from within. And become a force that could defy any obstacle thrown in the way. She doesn’t seek validation from outside she is proud of her own power and grace. Her beauty lies in her authenticity and uniqueness and not in imitation.

She doesn’t really need the approval of so called “pretty women” or the gazes of men. She knows her worth. She claims her identity and asserts her feminine power. And that makes her “Phenomenal”.

“Caged Bird”

This poem contains two main points. They are “bird” and “cage”. Bird is a metaphor of freedom and cage is as a prison. The poet describes bird as freedom because bird can fly wherever and whenever he wants. This poem is about Maya Angelo’s dark past who is raped by her mother’s boyfriend. The cage is a symbol of the prison or limitation of doing something. The poet uses the pronoun “his” for both free bird and cage bird to show the equality for being men and women.

The free bird leaps
On the back of the wind
And floats down stream
Till the current ends
And dips his wings
In the oranges unrays
And dares to claim the sky.

(Lines1-7)

The first line gives us a picture of free bird “The free bird leaps” means he is free to do whatever he likes. In the next line the poet uses “wind” and “floats downstream” as metaphor of white tradition. It means a definite power and gender marker that men are more superior to the women. “and dips his wings” means the free bird fly to a place that he wanted and “in the orange sun rays” is a symbol of the place of the caged bird that is prison.

Even though the colour of sun rays is orange, but the colour orange here is a symbol of prison uniforms in the America which means that the free bird comes to the narrow cage (the place) of the caged bird. Maya Angelou is trying to describe how powerful the men

are. The expression “and dares to claim the sky” means that the men have the absolute authority in owning and managing the government while she is staying in her cage.

The second stanza start with the word “but” which shows a different situation from the first stanza. The caged bird represents a human who is suffering. She stalks quietly so she will not be seen by anyone else.

His wings are clipped and his feet are tied
So he opens his throat to sing.

(Lines12-14)

The caged bird is possessed and cannot move at all. It is all about her past experience when she is traumatize by an inappropriate act by her mother’s boyfriend. “His wings are clipped” and, “his feet are tied” owner of the caged bird shuts the door from seeing the outside world. But the caged bird has her way to fight, she sings about the freedom even though nobody will listen to her.

The third stanza talks about how the women are afraid of the oppression from the men. They are trembled and their voices are shaken but they keep their faith, keep singing until the world hears their painful story. The “tune” symbolizes the hope to achieve the justice. The caged bird (as the woman) still sings the song of freedom.

And his tune is heard
For the caged bird sings of freedom

(Lines 21-22)

The fourth stanza talks about how the men care only about the wealth more than the struggle that women have faced. “Breeze” and the “fat worms” are symbolized as the hope and opportunity for the free bird (the men). The speaker uses auditory devices “the winds” to give the poem a continuous flow. “The sighing trees” is as personification as a symbol of suffering which means even the nature feels sorry for them (the women). In the last line in this fourth stanza clearly states “and he names the sky his own”. This line shows the man has an absolute authority in doing anything he likes.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
And the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
And the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
And he names the sky his own.

(Lines 23-26)

The women are in deep misery. They have walked through their dreams which have been dead and she is ready to let go and die “his shadow shouts on a

nightmare scream". The word "Shadow" represents the soul that screams loudly but cannot be heard. The next lines are the repetition from the previous lines in the second stanza. Maya Angelou describes that even though "his wings are clipped and his feet are tied" they have not lost hope completely and still fight for their rights. This stanza shows that the women will never give up.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied
So he opens his throat to sing
(Lines 29-30)

The last stanza is the repetition of the third stanza which emphasizes that it is all about the caged bird's deepest desire. They dreamed of a freedom to live the life without the judgments and stereotypes of social life.

Along with racism, gender discrimination has raised for over the centuries. The caged bird (the women) claims that they also can do everything that the free bird (the men) can do even in managing the country. The message of this poem is that equality may be hard to take place but as long as there is hope everything is possible. Everyone can be locked up or laid back but no one can stop us in expressing how we feel. Discrimination is a social illness that needs to be abolished. Maybe there is no equality between men and women but the poet wants us to keep on walking to the freedom. The only way for the women to save themselves are keep singing, having a voice and standing up for their rights.

II. MEENA KANDASAMY

Meena Kandasamy is the first Indian woman poet writing Dalit poetry in English. In her poetry she raises her voice against the Caste discrimination, gender inequality and systematic subjugation of Indian women. Her poetry arises not out of her reading and knowledge but out of her own lived experiences.

Her poetry is a clear-sighted, unafraid and a scathing attack on the perpetuation of the social patriarchal oppression of women in general and the Dalit women in particular. Indian society has some sort of social mechanisms, arrangements, customs and institutions that act as covert modes of establishing and perpetuating the subjugation of women. India, being a

male dominated, patriarchal society, deprived women of their basic rights as human beings.

Kandasamy delineates the subjects like "gender inequality" and "caste discrimination" with a candid precision. She dissects very deftly the complex mechanism of perpetual subjugation of the Indian woman in her writing.

Meena Kandasamy is an emerging poet, fiction writer, translator, journalist and a social activist. She maintains her focus, in throughout her writing, on caste annihilation and the issue of women's equality on par with a man. She is hailed as the first Indian woman poet writing Dalit Poetry in English.

III. TOUCH

Her first collection of poetry, Touch (2006) is a scathing, militant attack on the perpetuation of the social oppression of the Indian women. It discusses the issue of the sexual harassment of the women. Meena Kandasamy, unlike other poets and writers dealing with this subject, portrays women, particularly the Dalit women not just as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men but as rebels fighting against the injustice perpetuated against them and champions the cause of the equality of women.

A woman is considered a chattel by the male dominated society. Men of all castes and classes collude in making certain rules of behaviour and circumscribe the trajectory of female growth and confine her to the four walls of her house. In one of her poems in Touch (2006), entitled 'Songs of Summer', Meena Kandasamy rebukes the patriarchal society for treating the woman as its slave and a desired object: "She's mine"

To make her yours and yours alone
You pushed her deeper into harems
Where she could see the sunlight
Only from the lattice windows.

Domesticated into drudgery she was just
Another territory, worn out by wars. A slave
Who maintained your numbers. (Lines 1 to 7)

The experiences and spaces of marginalized women indeed have multiple nuances of formation and understanding, they are the ones who are on the margins of class, gender and caste discrimination and so are their sufferings too on the periphery. Their sufferings are not seen as something wrong rather it is considered as a usual consequence of everyday life.

The women are devoid of any voice in regard to their own body. Hence, the act of mutilation of the body not just in one layer but in multiple shades of oppression and domination is normal in the case of marginalized women.

The poem “A Cunning Stunt” establishes the relationship of the carnal involvement of a woman’s body to the arena of language.

‘bound in bed and blindfolded
I hear the man of words come to me.
cunt now becomes seat,
abode, home, lair, nest, stable
and he opens my legs wider
and shoves
harder and I am torn apart
to contain the meanings of family, race, stock and
caste (Lines 1-27).

The poem bears clear reference to the violence and assaults made on Dalit women by men. It also highlights the truth that a woman’s body does not belong to her for experiencing pleasure rather she is seen as an object of men’s needs and pleasure and is understood as an asexual and non-existent being.

In ‘Dignity’, she calls upon the privileged men to be sympathetic and considerate towards the oppressed class. She believes in dignity and equality of all. She wishes they would not deprive due share of the oppressed, maintaining their own dignity and faith. But in warning note she tells them not to suppress the marginalized without any rhyme and reason, and deny their dignity.

You stick to your faith
The incurable sickness
Of your minds,
don’t stop you from continuing
To tend centuries
Of cultivate superegos.
We will even let you wallow
In the rare happiness
That hierarchy provides
But don’t suppress
Our rightful share of dignity.
(Lines 7-18)

Meena Kandasamy’s poetry reclaims the violated body, confronts structures of caste and patriarchy and reasserts female agency through her language. Her poems sketch a movement from pain to resistance, from enforced silence to fearless speech. She writes

both personal and political trauma boldly. Her writings unsettle the oppressive narratives.

IV. CONCLUSION

Meena Kandasamy’s voice is like the voice of her African-American counterparts. It is powerful enough to break the boundaries and shatter the walls of the norms that have been long followed intentionally and unintentionally. Their poems hold a ring of pain and suffering, making the readers empathise with women. Their poems are hard core relatable to women suffering from external elements thereby resulting in internally conflicted emotions. The poets, though hailing from two polar opposites - the east and the west, display the plight of women due to gender discrimination which is further exemplified due to their position in the society based on their birth and caste.

Maya Angelou and Meena Kandasamy both believe in speaking out and voicing their misery. Instead of hiding them they try to take a definite action trying to quell the atrocities women face. Their personal background - Maya Angelou, a black woman feminist and Meena Kandasamy, a Dalit woman feminist is reflected in their works. The disparity of their sect in comparison to other sects is brought out, and the ideals of freedom and justice are sung in favour of the oppressed women.

Maya Angelou represents women as people who have crossed the path of struggles and obstacles and finally taken a hold over their life, revelling in their self-found identity with pride. Meena Kandasamy brings out the bold side of women, telling that a woman can stand up for herself when it deems necessary, and encourages women to take a stand for themselves. Though the ideas projected in their poems are similar, their poems vary on the basis of aesthetic appeal and value

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