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## Representing Dissent through Poetry: A Study of Select Poems of Maya Angelou

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### Abstract

Literature in general and protest poetry in particular have been vocal about human condition and problems. This article examines Maya Angelou's representation of dissent in selected poems, using the historical and socio-political context of her life as a lens. It analyses how Angelou's work, including "Still I Rise," "Caged Bird," "Phenomenal Woman," and some

others, articulates resistance against racial, gender, and social inequalities. Through her powerful metaphors, repetitive phrases, and vivid imagery, Angelou defied societal norms and called for change. The study concludes by emphasizing Angelou's enduring impact and legacy, not just in literature, but also in shaping civil rights discourse and inspiring social change. Her poetry exemplifies how art can be a potent instrument of protest. The article employs language for 'writing back', questioning norms, resisting atrocities and creating scope for change. Protest poetry, which is deeply embedded in American history, remains a prominent part of English literary corpus, contributing greatly to African American literature. The category of African American protest poetry is large owing to the huge expanse of time during which it has been written and also because of the great number of poets who have contributed to this form of writing. As a result, African American protest poetry is divided into three sub-categories— the first deals with protest during slavery, the second during segregation and Jim Crow Laws and the third after political obstacles to equality were presumably removed. This paper aims to deliberate on the following questions— what are the prominent themes of African American protest poetry? How have the African American poets used this genre of literature variously during different historical epochs? How are the concerns of female poets different from their male counterparts? What role has protest poetry played in political movements against inequality, social injustice, oppression, segregation etc.? The present paper aims to engage with this seemingly broad area of literature from the feminist and racial perspectives. The paper intends to deal with few important African American protest poets from foundational poets to the contemporary ones.

**Keywords:** African-American Protest poetry, Feminism, Slavery, Racism, Human Rights, Social injustice, Segregation, Resistance

## Introduction

Literature with its diverse forms has served a plethora of function in human civilization. Literature in general and protest poetry in particular have 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 etc. of great luminaries 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* on W. B Yeats, *The Sufis* on Doris Lessing, works of Fanon on Algerian revolution, works of Marx on Russian Revolution and peasant uprising in India, Carson's *Silent Spring* on climate activists and policy makers, literature has greatly contributed in shaping the history of the world. The protest literature in its varied forms too has contributed to this tremendous task.

Protest literature has existed in varied forms throughout the literary history. In its broader sense it encompasses media in form of film and photography as well as fiction and

poetry. This form of literature as a powerful mode of social analysis provides a voice to societal sentiments apart from invocation or demand for change. Several writers have used the form to call upon injustices at local or global levels thereby awakening the societies at large. As a form of art it concentrates on doing away with the society's problems/injustices and can either support or oppose political and social situations or laws. It may also serve as a document to inform people about a situation that can have lasting consequences. Several literatures in the contemporary time on climate change may serve as an example of the latter case. Within the corpus of literature contributed by African American writers the aspect of protest remains a central motif. The most dominant of the issues that resonate in these works are slavery, racism, gender inequality, political corruption and other problems in the decolonized world.

### **African American Protest Poetry**

The corpus of African American protest poetry is large owing to the huge expanse of time during which it has been written and also because of the great number of poets who have contributed to this form of writing. African American Protest literature may be defined as a form of literature aiming to bring, "redress to the secondary status of black people, of attempting to achieve the acceptance of black people into the larger American body politic, of encouraging practitioners of democracy truly to live up to what democratic ideals on American soil mean" (Harris). In the light of the above definition, African American Protest literature aims to articulate the inequalities on the basis of color, ethnicity or gender and instill the spirit to make amends to remove such injustices. The account of socioeconomic and political inequalities in America has a long history. It may be traced back to the 'civilizing mission' leading to the evils of slavery. This led to widespread hatred against the people of color who were brutalized, exploited and discriminated by the dominant white Americans. African American writers have used poetry besides drama, fiction, essays to address these issues.

African-Americans showed their resentment in a number of ways and one of the finest tools for this is poetry. Protest poetry includes the entire predicament that the African-Americans are living in from the earliest to the contemporary times. Its poetry questioned the very belief on which the foundation of America was laid and what was being practised. 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 poetry to address these issues but since this category is so large, African American protest poetry is divided into three sub-categories on the basis of the time period during which they were written and their chief thematic concerns. The first deals with Protest Poetry written during slavery, second during segregation and Jim Crow and third after the political obstacles to equality were presumably removed. The paper studies some protest poets who wrote in different historical epochs contrasting and highlighting the themes of their works.

Before 1865 most African-American writers wrote Protest Poetry to bring an end to slavery and their audience were mostly Northern Sympathizers. The poets that can be included in the category are Phillis Wheatley, George Moses Horton, Frances Harper and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Poets of Harlem Renaissance took up where Harper and Dunbar left forming the

second category of protest poetry that is the ones written during racial segregation and Jim Crow era. The Jim Crow laws were a collection of local and state statutes that legalized discrimination on the basis of race. These laws existed for about a hundred years denying the marginalized African Americans the right to vote, hold office or get an education. The segregation was so acute that the Africans were forbidden to use public parks, theatres, restaurants and waiting rooms used by the white people. Even marriage between black and white people was strictly forbidden. An oppressive law like this led to vigorous opposition wherein Protest poetry contributed greatly. Poets like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen commented on the social and economic conditions of people seemingly doomed to second class citizenship by violence that victimized them, the socio economic conditions that keep them locked in poverty and the unwavering resentment that turns hope into resignation.

Protest Poetry in the third period consists of writers associated with Black Aesthetic and Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement (BAM) on the one hand resisted the western influences and on the other celebrated the black experience. Their poems apart from criticizing America and its capitalist practices and racism aims to encourage the black people to appreciate and accept themselves while rejecting the white society that denigrates them. Amiri Barak, who began his publishing career in 1950s, shared his poetic sentiments with the Beat poets. He became an iconic figure of protest of the 1960s, in a variety of genres. His most militant poem is 'Black Art.'

### **Feminism, Racism and Identity**

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, a prominent American writer and civil rights activist, used her poetry to challenge prevailing norms, question injustices, and voice her dissent against societal and racial inequalities. Born in Northern Carolina in 1928, Angelou was a poet besides being a civil right activist and author of a series of autobiographies. Through the rhythmic verses and metaphorical language, Angelou made a profound statement of resistance and defiance. This article delves into a detailed analysis of select poems of Maya Angelou, highlighting how she represented dissent through her works. Her ability to overcome racism and other forms of oppression in her personal life made her a prominent spokesperson speaking for the cause of Blacks and women through her literary works. Her experiences as an African American woman fueled her fight against racial, gender, and social inequities, and these themes found potent expression in her poetry.

The paper aims to study the themes of racism, feminism and struggle for identity in her notable poems. Her poem "Alone" calls for human unity in the face of atrocities where poet uses the device of repetition to deliver her message, "Alone, all alone Nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone" (Angelou). The poem is based on the universal theme of isolation and suffering. The blacks being segregated and victims of hate crime and bigotry were made to feel

low and inferior. The atrocities gave way to a caged soul which Angelou yearns to release. ‘Caged Bird’ written during the period of Civil Rights Movement in America becomes a symbol for the black race devoid of human rights with their freedom being curtailed owing to the prevalence of racism. “His wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing” (Angelou). The poem though gives voice to the predicament of people of colour it is not completely devoid of hope. In fact, it serves as an anthem of hope and optimism in the midst of oppression and confinement when the poet calls out, “His tune is heard on distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom” (Angelou).

In her poems “Still I Rise” and “Phenomenal Woman”, race and gender remain dominant issues. In “Still I Rise” the speaker remains defiant in the face of violence and hatred. The defiant statement is on behalf of the entire black community. The poem opens thus:

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

The text addresses the colonizers and white supremacists who in the name of civilization with their lies have caused great harm to the people of colour. It talks about the power of the racists who have wrought a false history to belittle and exploit the black Americans. Amidst all this falsehood and domination, the speaker rises beyond the darkness of terror and fear. The poem embodies dreams and hope and serves as a message to everyone who faces discrimination inspiring them to never bow down in face of adversities. It is a cry for liberation and assertion of indomitable spirit of womanhood never to be bowed down by life’s odds.

Her “Phenomenal Woman” is a canto of praise of the inherent beauty in a woman who challenges restrictive notions of feminine beauty. In the vein of protest poetry, it rejects the social construction and stereotypes built around beauty and women and proposes for an alternative definition of real beauty. In her nonfiction, *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf talks about the pressure on women to follow unrealistic unattainable social standards of physical beauty and how these expectations undermine women psychologically and politically. Angelou, in a similar vein challenges the normative understanding of being beautiful and encourages self-acceptance and confidence in being what one is. She writes:

Now you understand  
Just why my head’s not bowed.  
I don’t shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud....  
Cause I’m a woman  
Phenomenally  
Phenomenal woman  
That’s me. (Angelou)

Though the poem does not explicitly address the issue of racism, the aspect of race remains a seething influence. Being a black woman in a society that inextricably associates

beauty with white skin colour the message of celebration of self is also a celebration of being a coloured person.

“Just Give me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore ‘I Diiiie” is yet another contribution by Angelou that intersects the issues of gender and race. The first part of the collection primarily deals with the themes of love and anguish. In the second section she has penned down the experience of survival of African Americans and takes help of irony and humour to make her statements sound stronger against racism. The first section beautifully paints women’s sexual and romantic experiences and challenges the gender codes of poetry written in previous eras. Here love is described from the perspective of a ‘Black Woman’. For instance, in her poem “When You come” the poet with the aid of figurative language emphasizes the emotions of a Black woman for her past love. She writes, “Offering me, as to a child, an attic,/Gathering of days too few./Baubles of stolen kisses” (Angelou). The second section is more combative in tone. It complements the survivors who have prevailed despite racism and great deal of challenges, which is clearly stated thus, “Through evening’s rest,/ you dream I hear the moans,/You die a thousand’s death” (Angelou).

The last lines of her poem “Sepia Fashion Show” reads, “I’d remind them please, look at those knees,/ You got at Miss Ann’s scrubbing” (Angelou). The poem shows how black women who were slaves had to show their knees in order to prove how hard they had cleaned. With the help of the poems in “Diiiie”, Maya Angelou has beautifully and yet bravely put the example of how a pen can help to portray the spirits of freedom, equality, and empowerment. Another lyrical poem of fourteen lines poem by Maya Angelou which shows the pathetic lives of African American in Harlem, New York, is ‘Harlem Hopscotch’. In this poem, she compares the life of African- Americans living in Harlem to the game of Hopscotch. The poem shows that as the player struggles at each step in the game of Hopscotch to reach the end and win similarly the blacks need to struggle to survive which is devised against poverty and racism. She writes, “In the air, now both foot down./ Since you black don’t stick around” (Angelou). The poem also shows that the black need to move ahead while facing hunger, humiliation and monetary problems. She writes, ‘Curse and cry, then jump to two.’ The poem also shows that rebellion in any form by the African American was not accepted and their life was full of challenges. Angelou notes, “Cross the line, they count you out. That’s what hopping’s all about” (Angelou). The poem ends with the poet suggesting death as an escape from the suffocating lives of slaves and the torture that they face.

Angelou’s poetry brilliantly used stylistic devices like metaphors, similes, and alliterations to articulate dissent. The repetition of phrases in “Still I Rise” reinforced the resilience against racial discrimination. The caged bird metaphor in “Caged Bird” vividly portrayed the stark difference between the free and the oppressed. In “Phenomenal Woman,” Angelou contradicted traditional concepts of beauty, presenting a dissenting stance on women’s portrayal. Angelou’s ability to represent dissent through her poetry has left an indelible impact. Her work continues to inspire, providing courage and hope to oppressed communities worldwide. Her influence extends beyond literature, shaping civil rights discourse and affecting social change.

If one looks at the contemporary Protest Poetry and the African- American poets of the recent times one can find thousands of poems on the same subjects which concern the three parameters of Protest Poetry discussed above. Poets like Amanda S. C. Gorman writes on the themes of oppression, feminism, race and marginalization, as well as African diaspora. She is influenced by the works of Maya Angelou. She is the first person to be named as National Youth Poet Laureate. Her poem “The Hill We Climb” is a powerful call to action focusing on themes of hope, unity, healing and resilience. Another contemporary poet Aja Monet’s poem “My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter” is an ode to mothers, daughters and sisters\the tiny gods who fight to change the world. Her poem not only tackles racism, sexism, genocide, displacement, heartbreak and grief but also love, motherhood, spirituality and Black joy. As one goes on reading, exploring and critically engaging with the category of Protest Poetry one finds it to be interesting, mystical and boundless.

Thus, Maya Angelou’s poetry is a remarkable representation of dissent, woven with themes of protest against racial, gender, and social inequalities. Her powerful words echo her resistance and defiance, leaving a profound impact and legacy. It is through understanding Angelou’s work, one can realize the potential of poetry to challenge the status quo, voice dissent, and spur change. Her work reminds us that poetry can, indeed, be a potent instrument of protest.

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