

STUDY OF VARIOUS ASPECTS OF SURVIVAL IN MAYA ANGELOU'S POETRY

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Abstract: *Maya Angelou is one of the most influential personalities who proved her versatile identity as a celebrated poet, memoirist, autobiographer, dramatist, producer actress, film maker and civil right activist. She has published variously volumes of poetry which deal with various subjects like African American life, past history, work, love African American and Self-identify, class struggle, racial concerns, survival, confession, feminism, etc. The theme of Survival is remained as one of the major themes in her poetry. The term survival can be considered as an action or decision which generally means to continue to exist and to live in spite of wreck, destruction, painful event. It is a power of will to endure the maltreatment and to rise hopefully. There are various aspects of survival reflected in the poetry of Angelou. It includes individual survival, generational survival, survival against racial discrimination, survival of African American women, Survival through revival of traditional forms etc.*

Maya Angelou is one of the most renowned and influential personalities. She has proved her versatile identity as a celebrated poet, memoirist, autobiographer, dramatist, producer actress, film maker and civil right activist. She was born on April 4th 1928 in St. Louis in Missouri but was raised in St. Louis and Stamps, Arkansas. Her original name was Marguerite Johnson but adopted the nick name 'Maya' given by her brother. Her life up to fifteen years old was full of grave experiences where she had been victimized to inhuman experiences. It is the reading and the efforts of a lady Mrs. Flower and her grandmother Angelou moved out not only from her speechless and depressed world but also emerged with a new love and hope for literature. Though she is popular and acclaimed for her autobiographical writings, her poetical career is not less powerful as she proved herself prolific poet. She has published various volumes of poetry which include *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of water' fore I Diie*, (1971), *Oh Pray My wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, (1974), *And Still I Rise*, (1978), *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?*, (1983), *Now Sheba Sings the Song*, (1987), *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990), *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*, (1993), *Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women* (1994), *A Brave and Startling Truth*, (1995), *Amazing Peace* (2005), *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer* (2006), etc. Angelou's recited one of her best-known poems "On the Pulse of Morning" at the presidential inauguration ceremony of U. S. President Bill Clinton in 1993. Her poems received mixed reviews. In fact Angelou's started writing poetry to express her painful experiences. However, the area of the themes enlarged as she dealt with various issues like love, painful loss, music, discrimination, pride, identity, cultural consciousness protest, survival etc.

The meaning of the term survival is given by the Cambridge Dictionary is, "when a person, organization, etc. continues to live or exist". The Oxford Dictionary defines it as, "the state or fact of continuing to live or exist, typically in spite of an accident, ordeal, or difficult circumstances." Taking into consideration the above definitions we may consider the concept of survival as an action or decision which generally means to continue to exist and to live in spite of wreck, destruction, painful event. It is a power of will to endure the maltreatment and to rise hopefully. A close study of the poetry of Maya Angelou reveals that survival remained one of the major themes in her poetry. There are various aspects of survival reflected in her poetry. The present paper aims to study and explore the various aspects survival in the poetry of Maya Angelou.

The individual life of Maya Angelou was full of sufferings and shocking experiences in the

beginning. Her autobiographical writings recorded the kind of life she suffered and lived. Her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* chronicles her life up to adolescent age. The work contains a horrible account of how she had been raped at an early. This act of inhuman treatment committed against her caused her to be speechless for nearly five years. As a result of it she went under depression. It was because of the continuous efforts of Mrs. Flowers and her grandmother and family that she could come out not only from her speechless depressed world but also emerged with a new love and hope for literature. Besides, she suffered from other tensions like premature motherhood, as well as social and political tensions. She had to do various jobs. Though Angelou does not refer individual experiences directly in her poetical work, she refers to it indirectly in some of the poems like "Men", "Little Girl speaks", "Born That Way", etc. She refers to an individual survival in the poetry. The poem "Men" from the collection *And Still I Rise* she refers to her views on the unfavorable and disgusting vice. Here, the poet exposes the sexual dominance and physical hunger of men. The poem "Born That way" from the volume *I shall not be Moved* gives an insight into the pain that she went through. The poet describes: "childhood whoring fitted her/for deceit. Daddy had been a/fonder. Soft lipped mouthings, /soft lapped rubbings. (P. 244, *The Complete...*). It is noteworthy that the very titles of her poetical collections like *And Still I Rise*, *I Shall Not Be Moved*; we come across the poet full of hope, optimism, and courage.

Racial discrimination is one of the most complex and most discussed issues in African- American literature. Racial discrimination on the ground of colour complexion is one of the major racial segregation. The African- Americans were considered as nigger. Angela's poetry celebrates the concept "Black is Beautiful" which was the motto of *Black Arts Movement*. Her poetry describes survival against racial discrimination. Her poetry reflects how she overcomes the feelings of subordination. Angelou's poetry reflects survival of African Americans which helps to overcome disturbance as well as psychological prison. She is not ashamed of her appearance. She accepts her physical appearance though not deserving for a fashion model's size. She accepts her characteristics that she possesses hopefully. One of the well-known poems written by Maya Angelou is "Phenomenal woman" from the collection *And still I Rise* where she refers to her survival regarding physical appearance. The poet depicts:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies. (P. 130, *The Collect...*)

Here, the poet is proud to reveal her 'Black Beauty', which makes her 'a woman phenomenally.' Here, though she accepts the truth that her beauty does not suit of fashion model's size, her physical gestures are not less than the white woman. Similarly the poem "The calling of Names" describes how the poet is over come from the shameful utterance 'nigger' which refers to darkness of skin with its varieties:

Light, Yellow, Brown
and Dark-brown skin,
were okay colors to
describe him then. (P. 46, *The Collect...*)

Similarly the poem "Passing Time" is a great slap on the so called concepts of colour complexion superiority. Her optimism for dark complexion and race is well described with comparison when the poet describes "Your skin like dawn,/Mine like dusk./One paints the beginning/of a certain end./The other, the end of a/Sure beginning." (P. 67).

Generations after generations of African- Americans has struggled for survival and freedom since the migration to America from their homeland Africa. Throughout the struggle each generation had its own experiences of loss, destruction and even deaths. Maya Angelou deals with the themes of loss, struggle and

deaths and feels proud about her people's courage and survival that are optimistic about better future. African Americans succeeded to create their own identity. It is the survival through generation and history. She is always impressed by the survival of her ancestors and previous generations in the most horrible and misfortunate conditions. Some of her poems like "When I Think About Myself" from *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie'* refers to how African-Americans survived in spite of oppression and injustice, while the poem "No No No No" expresses inevitability of survival of starved mother 'picking undigested beans from yesterday's shit.' The poem "Harlem Hopscotch" talks about the game which symbolizes slavery at Harlem, place of African-American civilization. . Life itself becomes a brutal game of hopscotch a series of desperate yet hopeful leaps landing but never pausing long. The poem records how African-American get lower treatment at social environment as well as hope for better future. The poem "The Pusher" taken from *Oh Pray My wings Are Gonna Fit Me well* talks about black ethnic power and real pride. The poem expresses hope of bright future through survival:

BLACK IS!"

"NATION TIME"

TOMORROW'S GLORY HERE TODAY (P.95)

The survival of the ancestors is finely reflected by Angelou in "Song for the old Ones" when the poet declares: "I understand their meaning/it could and did derive/from living on the edge of death /They kept my race alive.' (P. 109)

Survival and search for self-identity are also the major themes that Angelou deals with in her verse. The themes of survival of African Americans with pride and courage in America after migration are discussed in various poems by the poet. In the poem "Weekend Glory" Angelou portrays several working classes African-Americans who willingly accept their black identity. The poem presents an African American woman taking pride in being black and hopeful about her self-image. It encapsulates Angelou's perseverance in dealing with the emotional racial economic and relational aspects of the life:

If they want to learn how to live life right,
they ought to study me a Saturday night.

(P. No. 206, *The Complete ...*)

The poem affirms that they have right to enjoy the life as the whites. The poet is glad at her status which is neither heaven nor hell. The poem ends with a strong feeling of survival: "if I'm able to work/and get paid right/ and have the luck to be Black/on a Saturday night." (P. 207) .In the poem "Life Doesn't Frighten Me" the poet expresses her pride and courage where she says life doesn't frighten me when I look back at the grave past. In the poem "A Georgia Song" the poet discards cultural dominance.

The four most famous poems of Maya Angelou published earlier but collected together in the collection titled *Phenomenal Woman* are "Phenomenal Woman", "Still I Rise", "Our Grandmothers" and "Caged Bird". These poems can be considered as the representation of survival of the woman. The poem "Phenomenal Woman" presents the poet as a self-confident woman who wants to show the world what makes her beautiful. The poem asserts the courage audacity, strength and offers the creative and willful spirit of the 'phenomenal Woman.' The poem celebrates the strength of a black woman as she pursues economic stability in order to bring her recognition and independence : "Now you understand/ Just why my head's not bowed. (P. 131).

The poem "Still I Rise" is one of the most celebrated and popular poems by Maya Angelou. It celebrates courage and pride of an African American woman. The poet speaks about all sorts of maltreatment she can be failed with:

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. (P. 163)

The speaker challenges the stereotyped behaviour and refers to indomitable spirit of Black people. The poet compares herself to Black Ocean which is the source of endless energy and courage empowering the dominated people to survive, triumph over oppression and achieve positive self-identity. The next poem 'Caged Bird' displays a strong desire to break through the fences of racial oppression. African-Americans in this poem are compared to be caged bird, the image taken by Angelou from Dunbar's poem. The oppressive condition of African-Americans is metaphorically symbolized by expressions like 'clipped wings' and 'tied feet'. Due to cultural dominance and Anglo-American norms and loss of African culture, the African-Americans feel to be 'caged Bird.' However, the poem ends with a hope to sing for freedom.

The poem 'Our Grandmothers' confidently and courageously praises grandmother figure of the slavery and post-slavery era. The poem talks about the survival of a woman in spite of struggle, discrimination, slavery, starvation etc. The poet talks about the names given to African Americans once nigger, nigger bitch, heifer/mammy, property, creature, ape baboon/whore, hot tail, thing it." (P. 254) and takes it positively and declares her survival. She expresses her pride in the words: "I have a certain way of being in the world". (P. 254). Only due to her determination that she has certain way of being in this world could other generations learn how to stay upright, straight and unbroken. The poet praises the grandmothers for their survival and these faces are given noble names of popular African-American women like 'Sheba', 'Sojourner', 'Harriet' and 'Zorro', 'Angle' etc..

Survival through culture, humour religion and music is one another crucial means of staying alive for the poet. Maya Angelou uses humour to depict maltreat and oppressive condition of African-Americans. She uses black humour which satirizes or parodies the demeaning views. The poem "Old Folks Laugh" presents the feeling of comfort who forgive in spite of the sad realization of their life. Similarly the poem "Song for the Old Ones" talks about the sad 'lowly Uncle Tomming / and Aunt Jemima's smiles.'" Angelou expresses how these people kept the race alive living on the edge of death.

There are a few poems written by Angelou which show survival of African Americans through religion. The poem, 'Thank you Lord' is a fine example of it. In this poem the poet sees God "Brown-skinned Neat Afro Full Lips." She views him in the great leaders like Malcom, Martin and goes on to declare that Sunday services become sweeter when you are Black. The poet feels grateful for God as only because of him she is survived.

Maya Angelou always expressed her protest for cultural dominance. She tried to revive African folk culture through her poetry. A good number of poems were written in *Blues* and *Jazz* tradition by Maya Angelou. *Blues* are generally sad songs which generally speak of hard times, sad lives and obstacles the black people have experienced. Similarly *Jazz* stems from several musical sources. In a poem "A Good woman Feeling Bad" Angelou Says "The blues may be the life you've led". Angelou has written some other poems "Still I Rise", "Ain't that Bad" in the same style.

The close study of Angelou's poetry reveals that the theme survival is one of the distinctive trait remained in her poetry. Once she declared, "All my work, my life, everything is about survival." (P. No.13, *Conversations with Maya Angelou*). She has broadened the theme by dealing with various aspects of survival like individual, generational, survival against racial discrimination, through culture etc.. Angelou has presented and painted a crystal clear picture of African American with its past generations. Though her poems reveal the racial treatment full of slavery, oppression, struggle marginalization, she emerges optimistically for better future. This kind of survival and unshakable faith about better future is the major trait of her poetry. Survival of human beings always remained an interested theme to Angelou.

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