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## MUSIC, SURVIVAL AND TRANSCENDENCE : READING MAYA ANGELOU'S *AND STILL I RISE* (1978)

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### **Abstract:**

*Maya Angelou showed the world how to outlive exploitative racial discrimination and live joyously. As a rape survivor, she penned down some of the most bold and striking lines attacking the dominant white colonial attitude. In the present poetry collection taken for study, an attempt has been made to understand how the poet uses music as a site of protest and strategy to survive racism and sexism, thus paving the way for transcendence of the powerless bodies of women of the African American community into the spiritual realm. The study explores the link between music, survival and transcendence within the African American context.*

**Keywords:** *Music, spiritual, subversion, oppression, transcendence.*

*Our music is our key to survival - Ron Wellburn.*

*All my work, my life, everything is about survival - Maya Angelou.*

This paper explores how music becomes a survival strategy for disembodied self and powerless bodies of the African American community leading up to transcendence into the spiritual realm. Music is an art, a site of performance that becomes a conduit of expression of powerless bodies. Music in the state of performativity challenges the unsettling binary between permanent and ephemeral, physical and metaphysical and individual and collective. It is this musical space that serves as a strategy to posit resistance and challenge to the already established conventions. These conventions are the site from where germinates the stigmatized notion of creating polarisation that favors the Whites over the Blacks. It is then that the art of subversion starts that seeks to re-establish the black culture by denying the way of looking at 'culture' from objectified perspective narrowed down to forms of artifacts, rituals, and practices. Instead, blacks seek to define their culture as something that transcends the objectification of their experiences. The manifestation of those experiences corresponds to the inner dynamics of 'movement with existence'. As music operates on the dynamics of 'movement of existence' similarly the black experiences never ossify and follow the process of creative production in the form of 'high art' such as poetry.

Could one think of music having a philosophy of its own? Music when played and produced in the form of sounds, it has no physical dimension, it vanishes and goes ephemeral. But the moment one layers the sound with words and pens it down, it begins to assume physical properties, a kind of reality, bursting forth with emotions. Music is said to be operating onto two levels, absolute, that lies beyond the material, and, immanent, within the material level. Music operates around shifting away of understanding music as part of the cosmos towards understanding it materially. This also involves unsettling of the polarisations which this shifting inculcates, that is the binary between universal and particular, eternal and temporal and immaterial and material. Since it involves the coming together of sound and body it would be interesting to see how the sound uttered by a physical body exhibits a resistance that gives rise to subsequent actions.

If music is to survival, is survival the same to transcendence? One is left to think whether this transcendence imposed or desirable? Why is transcendence needed after all, could the bodies with all its

material existence and not experiences be contained in the given situation? Why would survival end up being transcendental? Also can we think of transcendence not only in spiritual terms but also transcendence of disembodied self in physical terms, such as migration of the 'black bodies' from region/colour/national specific to a more universal/international/spiritual realm?

Now to go back to any form of black music would lead us inevitably to its roots in religious or spiritual worship. Black music such as sorrow songs, spirituals and blues fundamentally evokes nostalgia for what has been lost. It acts as a racial memory. W.E.B. DuBois speaks of the sorrow songs as “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation... that breathes of a hope... where men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.”

How is it that the work songs, spirituals and protest songs by the Blacks began to be used as an art of subversion? The spirituals, work songs or blues were not merely for entertainment or for the sake of passing time. They served as an active weapon against the colonizers. These songs were transmitted around an ideology of freedom from slavery. That is where the enslaved exercised their agency of being able to express and communicate with other members on the plantation. These communications took the form of musicals often concealed with 'secret messages'. It would be interesting to explore the role these musicals often schemed around 'call-and-response,' 'shouts', and 'hollers' played in raising Black collective consciousness. As the secrecy of the Negro music started to fade, these songs were improvised to speak blatantly to the white oppressor. With the openness of communication, the subsequent development of blues and jazz explicitly or implicitly served as a medium of revolt against the white supremacy. While spirituals and gospels talked of the need of physical and spiritual liberation, blues being satirical in tone and Jazz being spontaneous embraced a carefree attitude amidst sordidness and sorrow.

Spirituals which have been ironically taken from the Christian Bible have been appropriated by the colonized to seek spiritual peace, strength, and courage to go back to the fields again. The gospels, blues, and jazz became means of surviving the emotional and physical inflictions. Paradoxically, they accepted the Bible of the masters and were “artistically and politically seduced by visions of an ultimately just God” (African- American Literature, Graham and ward. Jr.) But with growing awareness of the political, social and cultural exploitation, the Blacks started passive resistance following the scheme of assimilation, integration, and appropriation. For example, Jesus is no longer a white God but brown. That is where the art of subversion begins. On the one hand, one submits to the authority passively but on the other hand, one challenges its authority by appropriating the same tools which the colonizers used to control the colonized.

With these ideas at disposal, the present paper analyzes Maya Angelou's poetry as a survival strategy for liberation and transcendence. As music loses its physical dimensions to become ephemeral, similarly bodies in her poetry lose physical aspect and get transported to the spiritual realm. It becomes necessary for one to understand her personal life in her autobiographies to understand her poetry better because the history of oppression and survival is reflected in her poetry too.

Maya Angelou was born as Marguerite Annie Johnson on April 4, 1928, St. Louis, Missouri, U.S. She began her career as an entertainer and a nightclub dancer. The turning point in her life was when she earned the Lifetime Reynolds Professorship of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She became closely associated with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X inspired her to move to Africa where she started getting recognition in the field of music and drama. By 1970s she had already started writing down autobiographies, of which, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1970, was a huge success. It was then followed by volumes of poetry and subsequently was called “the black woman's poet laureate”. In 1993, she became the second person to read her poem, *On the Pulse of Morning*, at President Bill Clinton's inauguration ceremony. She died on May 28, 2014, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, U.S.

Her poetry serves as a medium to assert racial pride, distort false allusions, provide emotional

comfort and create spiritual peace. The poetic space serves as a site of capturing the social, political and cultural milieu to make a political intervention to ensure ideological liberation. She puts the figure of the woman at the centre to challenge the male-centric aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement. By using the feminine figure as a musical body she intends to glorify life with all its ups and downs. She deploys the rhythmic pattern in a sensual manner to produce transcendence over all her despair. She follows the tradition of Langston Hughes of writing brief poems that are short and crisp bombarding with black creative energy. In recounting the accounts of the past one is left bewildered that do her poems reflect internalization of weakness as a female self? As we have become individuated in our own experiences there is a need to grow out of our partial knowledge of the self and develop more into a useful conversation among 'situated knowers' thus developing the individuated consciousness into collective consciousness. (Donna Haraway, from 'Situated Knowledge'). Keeping all these dynamics at hand the present paper looks at the poetry collection *And Still I Rise* (1978).

Lyman B. Hagen states that *And Still I Rise* is inspired by the traditional spiritual lines ' Oh rise and shine, and give God the glory, glory/ Oh Rise, Oh Rise...(Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer and Soul of a Poet p.128). The entire collection speaks of 'indomitable spirit' and 'hopeful determination' to rise above the atrocities. The collection has been divided into three parts, "Touch Me, Life, Not Softly," "Traveling," and "And Still I Rise."

In "Where We Belong, A Duet," the poet starts with the optimism of finding some significance by juxtaposing the particular with the universal. She starts off with a lively description of her search for true love, as in something mysterious, rare to find on this earthly spatial realm. The lines:

*I read the mysterious meaning, In the distant stars... (line 7-8, Where We Belong, A Duet)*

suggest universality and transcendental reach of this search. This immateriality is immediately juxtaposed with the material aspects expressed in her reckless and a frantic search for love, anywhere and everywhere, expressed in the following enjambed lines, reflecting on the fragmented self which only true love could fix:

*I was quick and breezy. And always, Playing Romantic Games... (line 16-18, Where We Belong, A Duet)*

The existential crisis that the blacks undergo is expressed in the following lines where the poet universalizes the feeling of isolation and loneliness in her mundane act of falling in love time and again, like the act of Sisyphus, rolling the stone up to the cliff, again and again, knowing the futility of the act.

*If fell in Love forever; Twice every year or so... (line 23-24, Where We Belong, A Duet)*

But her men were too reckless to get serious about love and,

*But they always let me go... (line 27, Where We Belong, A Duet)*

And then, the poet seems to have found what was she looking for, her true love, symbolic of significance of her existence, self-acceptance, its only after finding true love that she can actually find the importance of her earthly existence.

Then you rose into my life

Like a promised sunrise.

Brightening my days with the light in your eyes...

I've never been so strong.

Now I'm where I belong. (line 35-40, Where We Belong, A Duet)

This sense of belonging to a place, the human emotional need to be accepted by people around, suggests the idea of the uprootedness of the black folks. They have been migrated to an alien world leaving their past life behind which renders them culturally lost. Also, the individual experience of being isolated from the rest of the world has been universalized by the poet in her attempt to reflect on the loneliness of the black community in being not accepted as humans, intellectuals and cultural communities.

In “Phenomenal Woman”, the poet deploys the ballad form, expressing the self confidence of the woman, explicit in her use of the free-verse narrative, that takes the idea of transcendence to another level by transporting the female bodies to the spiritual level, she writes:

*Men themselves have wondered, What they see in me.*

*They try so much, But they can't touch, My inner mystery. (line 30-34, Phenomenal Woman)*

The poet has made the disembodied material female body as a powerful source of womanhood, mysteriously abstract and incomprehensibly immanent, beyond the reach of the ordinary men or common folks. The poem takes a jibe at the American standard of beauty that visualizes African American women's non-conformity to the set standards. The short, crisp lines burgeoning with immense energy, and spirit ironically suggests that inner beauty is the real beauty. This could also be seen in the light of mysticism, where the African American women remains a mystery to men, suggesting they are spiritually far ahead than the men who have not been able to transcend the earthly that restrict their knowledge of the Supreme.

In “Just for a Time”, the poet proposes to move beyond the brooding attitude of having nostalgia for the lost and states confidently that:

*I don't like reminiscing, Nostalgia is not my forte*

*I don't spill tears, On yesterday's years, (line 11-14, Just for a Time)*

She goes on to state that how once she was so special for someone,

*But honesty makes me say, You were a precious pearl*

*How I loved to see you shine, You were the perfect girl.*

*And you were mine. For a time. For a time. Just for a time. (line 15-22, Just for a Time)*

The last few lines of the poem runs like a musical melody and the rhyming scheme gives it a sing-song quality. These lines not only connote the need of having someone special, whose entry into the poet's world would change things forever. This special someone is symbolic of hopeful determination. The image of “perfect someone” that the poet creates could actually be equated with the idea of perfect world, a world meant for Blacks, a parallel universe where the glory of the Black community would overwhelm the artificial glitter of stereotypical notions that deny the half of the race their right to lead a life of dignity.

Part two, “Traveling”, is about migration, transcendence, rising above and beyond the limitations. It is a quest for self-identity.

In “Woman Work,” The narrator is a slave and talks about female subjugation. The activities described below are imposed on her for the benefit of the others, i.e. the masters. The rhyming scheme shows the banality of the work that a woman has to do. Also, the rhythmic pattern suggests the endlessness of the responsibilities, expressed in the lines:

*I've got the children to tend, The clothes to mend, The floor to mop, The food to shop... (line 1-4, Woman Work)*

The next few lines describe elements of nature that comfort her:

*Shine on me, sunshine, Rain on me, rain*

*Fall softly, dewdrops, And cool my brow again... (line 15-18, Woman Work)*

*Sun, rain, curving sky, Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone*

*Star shine, moon glow, You're all that I can call my own. (line 27-30, Woman Work)*

The above line suggests the traditional relationship between nature and woman. But unlike the European notion that equates women with nature, here the poet declares that nature is the only element that provides comfort to women. Even this comfort remains questionable as she has to depend on the mercy of nature just as her dependence on men. The only things that she can actually call her own are the elements of nature and even that remains debatable. It suggests a lack of authority over herself.

In “One More Round”, the tone of the poem changes and the poet shows her anger in a subtle way. This is a work song, and the music is traditionally wrapped into the adverse experiences of the slaves. The

song is based on 'call and response' structure where enslaved African-Americans talked about their masters and shared their opinions in coded form. This song was written during the Civil Rights Movement. This poem explains to the readers how does setting activity to music influence a person's attitude to the task? The infusion of musical quality in a work song becomes a tool of surviving the oppression and securing spiritual peace, if not physical and emotional, for the collective. The following lines suggest the difference between hard work and imposed overwork that drains out the spirit of the man to move beyond. In other words, the poem seems to be suggesting the difference between a hard-working man and an overworked slave.

*And now I'll tell you my Golden Rule,  
I was born to work but I ain't no mule.  
I was born to work up to my grave  
But I was not born  
To be a slave. (line 28-32, One more round)*

Critic Robert B. Stepto states that the poet creates a new form of art out of these work/protest songs. The following refrain suggests the desire of the enslaved to break away from the racially discriminatory trap that houses inequality and injustice. The 'I' of the poem no longer remains singular rather following the tradition of Frederick Douglas, the singular 'I' assumes plurality, expressing the collective consciousness.

One more round  
And let's heave it down,  
One more round  
And let's heave it down. (line 33-36, One more round)  
Part Three, "And Still I Rise"

In "Ain't That Bad?" the poet emphasises on the assertion "Black is Beautiful". Black relegated as dark and violent is the new source of creative power. The poet subverts the stereotypical notion of 'black' as ugly and instead declares:

*Wrappin' up in Blackness, Don't I shine and glow?... (line 7-8, Ain't That Bad)*

She equates other colours with black to subvert old cultural ideology that sees Blacks as exotic:

*Dressing in purples and pinks and greens, Exotic as rum and cokes  
Living our lives with flash and style, Ain't we colourful folks?... (line 36-39, Ain't That Bad)*

In the last refrain she plays around the words 'bad' and 'black' to highlight her pride in being black. She puts rhetorical question equating 'black' with 'fine'.

*An' ain't we bad?  
An' ain't we Black?  
An' ain't we fine? (line 44-46, Ain't That Bad)*

The figure of 'Job' is important here because like the enslaved, he also showed complete loyalty against all odds toward the Lord. The poet makes a sarcastic remark on established ideas that are false. No matter what they did for the alien land they were always relegated to the lowest denomination. The poet ironically implies that we have not been able to transcend our statehood of discrimination and oppression because all these while we have been relying on the God of the colonizer. We need to appropriate the Lord so that justice could reach out to us. Taking the same argument in the next poem,

*In "Thank You, Lord,"* the poet deconstructs the white, ideal image of the Lord, a figure of authority that imparts power to the whites to govern the lives of the black folk. The poet re-appropriates the Lord, and Jesus turns out to be no longer a white but brown-skinned, Lord of the Blacks, It is here that art of transgression starts leading to subversion. It is this indirect subversion, the Churchification that acts as a strategy to survive amidst all odds. She visualises:

*I see You, Brown skinned,*

*Neat Afro, Full Lips, (line 1-4, Thank You, Lord)*

and eulogise the black heroes, who contributed to the alien land, turning the pages of history upside down,

*A little goatee. A Malcolm,*

*Martin, Du Bois. (line 5-7, Thank You, Lord)*

She boldly criticizes the ritual practice that worshipped the White Lord, who could not see to their sufferings and instead declares:

*Sunday services become sweeter when You're Black, Then I don't have to explain why*

*I was out balling the town down, Saturday night... (line 9-12, Thank You, Lord)*

She then goes on to say how insecure she felt and prayed against all hope of redemption but because of mercy shown by this new Brown-Skinned Lord, she hopes to transcend the trepidations of the world and seeks to rejoice in the newer world, she says,

*I was once a sinner man, Living unsaved and wild,*

*Taking my chances in a dangerous world,*

*Putting my soul on trial. Because of Your Mercy, (line 41-46, Thank You, Lord)*

*When I die I'll live again, Let me humbly say,*

*Thank You for this day. I want to thank You. (line 50-54, Thank You, Lord)*

And in "Still I Rise", once she has incorporated, parodied, re-appropriated and established her self-assertion which is not individuated rather collective, that she boldly challenges the White oppressors. She speaks on behalf of the Black community and starts off by challenging the documentation of the lives of the Black in the pages of historical continuity. She posits that the whites were able to dominate the Blacks also because they had an oral culture which remains undocumented and what remains undocumented could easily be improvised and be dominated over, unlike the writing culture of the whites that became an important means of physical, figurative and literal subjugation of the blacks. She asserts her rejection of further oppression by stating:

*You may write me down in history, With your bitter, twisted lies (line 1-2, Still I Rise)*

No sooner than she mentions literal subjugation that she moves to physical violence that seems more metaphorical rather being literal, she states:

*You may trod me in the very dirt, But still, like dust, I'll rise... (line 3-4, Still I Rise)*

The use of 'dust' is very effective in the sense that she turns something negative into positive. The lines run sensually rhythmic suggesting unstoppable spirit of defiance. The rising of the dust is symbolic of spiritual resurrection much like Yeatsian way, the formless spiral of renewed energy and power.

*Out of the huts of history's shame, I rise*

*Up from a past that is rooted in pain, I rise (line 29-32, Still I Rise)*

She enumerates that for the Blacks, history has been shameful, a past that was painful, but denying her internalization of 'zero image', that basically renders the blacks worthless, the poet makes an optimistic prophetic vision, much like 'vision' of William Blake, using the metaphor of the ocean, that is Black, symbolic of Black creative power and domineering spirit to rise above the atrocities of life, she states:

*I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, Welling and swelling I bear in the tide... (line 33-34, Still I Rise)*

Then the poet goes on to assert the fearful night would fade away to give rise to the sanguine morning of hope and spiritual peace. The refrain 'I rise' repeated three times suggests relentless determination to continue the struggle against the adversities.

*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  
Irise  
Irise  
Irise. (line 35-46, Still I Rise)*

Maya Angelou here celebrates the nostalgia for lost cultural heritage which needs revival and autonomy that speaks of her resilience and indomitable spirit in the face of adversity. She uses the poetic space as a site of resistance, recuperating the cultural history of the disembodied black community against the facade of equality and social recognition that the racist white oppressors maintained. Using the rhetorical narrative technique and ironical remark she 'writes back to the empire,' shedding light on an alternative, non-linear, incoherent, alternative historical continuum that the whites deprived the world of. She calls for spiritual renaissance by disrupting the moments of distortion and discontinuities inculcated in unrecognized black cultural heritage. She infuses black music in poetry to survive the adversities and transcend the hardship to resurrect spiritually.

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