

**Defiant to Didactic:  
Change in Tone in Maya Angelou's Poetry  
with reference to Selected Poems.**

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**Abstract:**

This paper aims to highlight the tonal change in Maya Angelou's poetry with reference to her early poem 'Caged Bird', 'Still I Rise' and a late poem 'Human Family'. Maya Angelou herself belonged to Afro-American community. Blacks were brought to Virginia as slaves by the White Americans. Their existential trauma owing to marginalized living, racial abuse, physical torture, lack of civil liberties and sexual assault forced Maya Angelou to pick her pen as her weapon and raise her voice against oppression.

In 'Caged Bird', she equates a black person with a captive bird whose feet have been tied and wings are clipped to prevent him from flying out of the cage into the open sky like a free bird (white person). Even in the cage, it dares to sing a song of freedom and raise its voice against brutality of its masters. Song here signifies black community's courage and determination to carry their fight against the oppressor. The underlying tone of defiance is all pervasive.

In 'Still I Rise' the first stanza sets the tone of defiance that is carried onto the end of the poem. In the first stanza she challenges the whites by asserting that even if she is trampled by them in the dirt she will rise from dirt itself and stand tall before them. The word "Still" conveys poet's determination, defiance and her march for the goal of freedom. "I" here stands not only for Maya but it encompasses her community also. This poem served as a clarion call for the black women to keep fighting till the dawn of freedom arrives. Maya Angelou was a Civil Right Activist also and when her friends and fellow activist died in the Riot it broke her from inside. As a result, her tone became philosophical and didactic. In 'Human Family' she says some wise words. When she recited this poem in U.N Assembly she herself said, "I am asked to say some wise words." The poem is didactic in nature as it conveys the message that all human beings are more "alike than unlike". The people across the world may vary in their skin tone, likes, dislikes, habits, way of life, but emotionally they belong to one race – Human race. Their emotional qualities make them similar: love, kindness, pity, empathy etc. Here, also she conveys her message that in spite of racial differences mankind is one and so the social prejudice should end. The tone has changed but her message for brotherhood, equality and freedom for all, reflects in her poetry.

**Key Words:** Captivity, Freedom, Oppressor, A like, Unalike

### **Background**

Black people of Africa were brought to Virginia in 1619, to serve as slaves to the white masters. They were called Niggers/ Negroes and were treated in inhuman manner; whipped up and kicked brutally, abused and kept in chains. They were forced to live a segregated and degraded life devoid of all civil liberties. Hunger and poverty made their lives miserable. The simmering anger against oppression erupted into a civil war (1861) which led to official declaration of abolishing slavery in 1865. But it did not help in mitigating the sufferings of the Black in American culture as it was ruled by the whites and so Harlem Riot occurred in 1960 causing heavy destruction and the loss of human lives. These riots continued upto 1964 and 1967.

### **Introduction**

Maya Angelou ,a celebrated (Af-Am) poet, was born on April 4, 1928, in Louis, Missouri and raised in St. Louis and stamps, Arkansas. She barged into literary field dominated by white writers by publication of her first autobiographical book: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The book lays bare the existential trauma of her early childhood and adolescence period when she was sexually exploited, raped and racially abused and maltreated. Before she took up the pen she worked as a waitress, prostitute, cook and dancer in San Francisco (1940). After moving to New York city in 1960, she joined Harlem Writer's Guild. The writer there encouraged her to read and write. She listened to their talks, debates and read a lot of books there. On the work front she joined folk opera Porgy and Bess as an artist and moved with the troupe to 22 countries in Europe and Africa. In 1961 after marriage, she moved to Cairo. After returning to California in 1966, she wrote 'Black-Blues-Black' for television series. When in 1969, her first book came out, there was no looking back. Her work depicts what her community and she herself suffered by being black.

Racial prejudice is a known phenomenon. White, Brown and Black are three major skin colors which we identify a person's identity and nationality viz. Europeans are white, Asians are brown and Africans are black. She used her pen as a weapon to reveal the existential trauma of her community, their hurt and pain owing to physical abuse, violence, lack of all civic liberties, rape and physical assault on women. Her pen brought transformation in her- from a fearful woman and a victim of racial prejudice to a fearless person who vociferously raised her voice against oppression and responded effectively in a daring manner. The rebellious fire inside her prodded her to speak about the hellish conditions in which people of her community were living.

She has expressed this mental trauma in 'Caged Bird' which is included in the fourth volume of her poetry :*Shaker: Why Don't You Sing?* (1983)<sup>1</sup> The poem created ripples in the literary field dominated by the whites. In the first stanza ,the happiness surrounding a free bird is depicted; and in the second stanza, the plight of a caged bird is brought before the eyes of the readers:

Free bird leaps on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream till the current ends

and dips his wing in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky

But a caged bird that stalks down his narrow cage  
Can seldom see through his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

Here by comparing a “caged bird” with a Free bird”, she tries to express her and her community’s love for freedom. The word “cage” means captivity, so in a way “caged bird” represents a black person’s captivity. Its “tied feet” and “clipped wings” reveal its segregation, its inability to fly like the free bird in the sky and realize its dream of freedom. While free bird is enjoying its freedom uninhibited and going up dreaming of reaching the sky, the caged bird has been confined, so that it may not dare to fly high. Free bird (the whites) does not know anything about slavery as it has never been in a cage, and all civil liberties are available to it. Freedom, poised against the pain of slavery, is aptly represented in the poem. The song of the bird is a call to be fearless and lodge protest against oppression. The third stanza is about the song sung by the caged bird. It represents fear of the unknown as well as hope that dawn of freedom is not far away:

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill  
of things unknown but longed for still  
and his tune is heard on the distant hill  
for the caged bird sings for freedom.

The song here represents Black community’s courage and determination to carry their fight against the oppressor. The underlying theme of defiance is all pervasive. The song aptly conveys the message that one day the goal of freedom will be achieved against all odds. It is a sort of challenge thrown at the perpetrators of violence and oppression.

‘Still I Rise’ is another poem full of assertion of indomitable spirit, telling the whites that blacks are not to be cowed down by their oppressive tactics and is included in the third volume of her poetry ‘And Still I Rise’<sup>2</sup>.

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.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high  
Still I’ll rise.

The volcano of suppressed anger has burst out and her pen refuses to stop. Andrew spicy considers it an empowering poem all about struggle to overcome prejudice and injustice<sup>3</sup>.

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
(...)Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise

The word 'Still' says it all. It encompasses the hurt and humiliation and also the ability to re-rise with head held high. At first the reader thinks the poem to be subjective. The first line makes the reader believe that 'me' is about the narrator and 'you' is about a specific person addressed to. In fact "you" stands for all those who had written distorted history and spread hatred. Similarly, 'me' signifies the black community as a whole. Like the first stanza all other stanzas also end with the word 'Still I Rise'. Repetition is intentional to send a strong message that Afro-Americans love their personality and rejoice in their physical beauty. She will not be cowed down and rise from the dirt like 'phoenix'. She revels in her physical assets and sexiness to challenge the whites. In the same way, she talks of the moon, sun and tides which rise again and again and her capacity to be like them. In spite of being segregated and living without civil rights, she is not going to stop her fight.

The last two stanzas of the poem show her determination to cross all barriers to achieve the goal of freedom. She declares that she is like a black ocean which keeps on welling and swelling' and there are tides also. Like the ocean she will leave behind terror and fear and rise again into a day break of freedom. The repetition of the word 'Still I Rise' is intentional. She wants to send a message that she and her people will keep on fighting for freedom. Here also in the concluding stanza 'I Rise' is repeated three times:-

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise

The repetition is to impress upon her community that shun fearfulness and fight courageously in spite of all hurdles to achieve the goal of freedom from slavery. She also wants to convey to readers the message that her pen is not going to stop writing about the travails of her community. The poem is considered an anthem by her race as it serves as a beacon of hope for them and gives them courage to continue their fight against oppression. It can be labeled as an anthem of indomitable spirit.

It is apparent from the above poems that when she started writing her aim was to expose the reality of black people loudly, in a thunderous voice, so that her voice may be heard across the world Her poems have universal appeal across the world even today, as racial wars are still going on. The racial prejudice has increased and is the basis of these wars.

She lost many of her friends in riot which took during her period and it broke her heart but she knew that she could not let her grief overpower her and so she picked up her pen to castigate so called liberals.

Harlem Riot and the death of her friends neither mitigated the anger nor subsided the pain , but her tone became less defiant and more didactic and philosophical like her condemnation of the white liberals who kept quiet and watched the riot and the devastation in ‘We Saw Beyond Our Seeming’<sup>4</sup>:-

We Saw Beyond Our Seeming,  
These days of bloodied screaming.  
(....}  
Deafened and unwilling,  
We aided in the killing.

In ‘My Guilt’<sup>5</sup>, she talks of her crime (guilt) that she is alive even when her friends have gone away fighting a war of freedom from slavery. She feels guilty that she has been unable to break the chains of oppression but lost her friends: Gabriel, Malcolm, Marcus and Martin King Jr. in this racial war. She tells her people that she is alive to carry on the fight along with them, to break the chains of slavery:

My sin is ” hanging from a tree,”  
I do not screen it makes me proud.  
I take to dying like aman. I  
I do it to impress the crowd.  
My sin lies in not screaming .loud.

Not screaming gave rise to thinking soberly and writing didactic and illuminating poetry. ‘Human Family’ is one such poem, which is relatable because of the message it conveys that emotionally all human beings are same and dissimilarities don’t matter, She read this poem in United Nations Assembly when she was asked to speak some “wise words”<sup>6</sup> With the passing of years she had matured into a wise and famous multifaceted personality.

I note the obvious difference  
In the human family.  
Some of us are serious,  
Some thrive on comedy.

The first stanza of the poem is about serious and humorous people. The difference here is in their thinking as serious people don't like comedy that means they don't like to laugh much while humorous people like comedy as it gives them a chance to laugh and feel light-hearted. Second stanza also is about a subtle difference among people more important than dissimilarities. Each human being is unique even twins may differ in taste, liking dislikes, temperament. But the common thread that binds us together is our emotional aspect

Like many civil rights activist Maya Angelou was working for equal civil rights for all without racial discrimination, for which she and her people suffered. Human Family was published in 2006 as part of collection 'Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer'<sup>7</sup>. Maya lays stress on the fact that despite differences in appearance languages or culture which are superficial all humans belong to human race and emotionally are the same. People may belong to different countries, religions but the basic human qualities remain the same which make them similar, similarities are far from the real reality. Some live according to their insight that means being theoretical but some like to live with reality that is more practical way of living life. People are living life though modes are different.

the variety of our skin tones  
(....)  
tan and blue and white.

In this verse the poet focuses on the physical difference of skin tones between different communities. The word choice "confuse be muse delight give a light hearted touch of expressing the skin tone under stress. "black and white and brown". She also mentions other skin tones like "beige" and "tan", blues and purples and pink; Beneath these skin tones the heart and the emotions are similar".

I have sailed upon the seven seas  
(....)

not yet one common man;

In the fourth stanza she draws readers attention to seven seas and wonders in every continent to bring home the point that no two people across different lands are alike beyond their active or passive life styles or serious and comic nature.

I know ten thousand women  
(....)  
Who really were the same.

Again citing example of woman called Jane, she conveys the message that out of ten thousand janes- no two are alike. Even the identical twins are different in their behaviors and also lovers. The only bond that binds humans is their humanness, kindness, empathy and lots of love for the fellow human beings.

So, the pain of being considered unequal has not lessened but the tone and vocabulary has become softer to express upon the readers that all human beings are same and belong to human family irrespective of all the difference in color, creed or caste and so they all must enjoy the freedom to live their lives as they wish. The racial inequality must end. The following quote reveals why it was imperative for her to speak:

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you” (Maya Angelou)<sup>8</sup>

She wanted to get rid of that agony by speaking the truth about the racially abused people. She had the guts to speak defiantly and also speak in subtle tones. She wanted to tell untold stories of her people's suffering so, she let her pen do the talking. The tonal change is obvious in this poem. Her ideas about racial equality have been presented in a normal tone. The defiant tone is missing. But this change came slowly over the years. Her work was noticed and she got many awards: Langston Hughes Medal, (1991), National Medal of Arts, (2002), Presidential Medal of Freedom, (2010). Nelson Mandela read 'Still I Rise' at his inauguration in 1994. She got the honor of reading her poem: 'On the Pulse of Morning' in 1999 at president Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration.<sup>9</sup>

Her fight for civil liberties and her literary work bears testimony to the fact that she worked with passion for the upliftment of her race. She was successful in awakening the minds of her community. No other than Michelle Obama admitted this while speaking at her memorial service;

She knew our pain, our ambitions, our fears our anger, our shame and assured us that in spite of it all; in fact because of it all we were good. And in doing so she paved the way for me and Oprah and so many others just to be our good old black women selves.<sup>10</sup>

Even today, in spite of the geographical gap, the echo of her words can be felt in literary hubs where scholarly minds discuss about racial hatred. Her message remains the same - freedom from slavery and equal civil rights for all; but her tone of conveying her message has changed from defiant to didactic.

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