


Black Identity Formation in Repression: A Study of Selected Poems of Maya Angelou			Literature
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Abstract			
<p>This work focuses on the struggle for Black identity formation by African-Americans which has always been a continuous task, despite their constant state of repression. This research, aims at revealing the excruciating ordeals of African-Americans in the hands of not just racist Whites but in the hands of black males as well. This research goes further to show how the black female character is struggling to assert herself from patriarchal subjugation. This research uses both primary and secondary sources of data to carry out a detailed exploration of the text under study. For the primary sources, a study of selected poems of Maya Angelou will be used. While the secondary sources consist studies that other researchers have made, concerning this research. This research adopts two theoretical criticisms the Feminist literary theory and the Marxist literary criticism. These theories have been able to promote the status of subjugated black females, by portraying them in positive light, making them conscious of their capabilities and rights and that they are not inferior to the males. It goes further to strive for class equality, so that African-Americans like European-Americans can enjoy equal rights and privileges. This study reveals that though African-Americans females suffer doubly as a result of their race and gender, their resilience at forging for themselves a sense of self amidst oppression remains intact. This paper concludes with a look into how Maya weaves imagery and symbols into ebonics to forge a unique and belligerent linguistic culture for African-Americans.</p>			

Introduction

Over the years, Blacks have been heavily oppressed and subjugated to injustice meted out on them by the Whites in the United States of America. These oppression and subjugation did not only keep them in a state of repression but made them lose their identity. Although both Black men and women are heavily oppressed; that of black women is worse. Generally, all over the world women had been marginalized but the Black females had the most profound effect of marginalization. For instance, Kerstin, Giulia et al posit that “A woman in the black power movement was considered at best irrelevant. A woman herself was a pariah cone that is despised and rejected, if a black woman assume a role of leadership, she was said to be enrolling black manhood, to be hindering progress of the black race. She was on enemy of black people” (33). From this quote, we can see how women’s perception of themselves in the Black Power Movement does not have public validation and this is obviously identity denial. This identity denial is socially and historically constructed to consolidate male dominance across all facets of society.

The era of colonization, has brought slavery and its disastrous effect on African-Americans, especially on the women. Women were physically and sexually harassed by their slave masters. They are made to work laboriously in plantations. The lost of the identity of African-Americans was brought about by slavery. It resulted in the loss of their names and culture. They were seen as less than humans hence the bestial status conferred on Blacks.

After slavery, the post-colonial era emerged. In this era, slavery was no longer a concern but other pertinent issues such as racial discrimination, class oppression, and sexism plagued African-American in the United States of America. For instance, Harold Blooms, says the poem “caged Bird is a lament for a freedom never known” (18). From this quote, it is noted that the African-American personality, is likened to a caged bird that is constantly tied down and yearns for freedom that seems impossible to obtain.

The quest for identity formation in the state of black repression has been a recurrent theme in African-American writings because of their zeal to regain their identity and de-emphasis what Olufolajimi Adejokun describes as the “politics of racism and hegemonic power politics” (493) being a race superiority claim by European-Americans. Thus African-American writers in their works, incite their black people to strive for recognition, rise amidst all domination and fight to assert themselves from subjugation. In essence, they are encouraged to fight and push harder in order to reclaim their loss identity despite their state of constant repression.

For the exploration of this study, the African-American female poet, Maya Angelou will be taken into consideration. Her poems deal with the identity of African-American females, as well as that of the males who had become victims of racism, sexism and class oppression brought about by colonization. Maya reveals the pathetic conditions of the females, whose identity is not established as a human being, hence leading to their state of subjugation by both White and Black males. Maya’s poetry also seeks liberation for Black women. In her poems, she seeks to rediscover the history of African-Americans and explore horrible experiences faced by African-American females. In Harold Blooms view “Maya Angelou’s poetry seeks to discover the ways in which her own poetry elicits racial pride, disrupts false allegiances, provides healing community creates boundless affinity, yields individual consciousness, allows triumph, ensures survival and serves as a political ideology”(131).

He goes further to say that the universal concept of women in Angelou’s poems unites all women despite any cultural, national, racial or any other differences. He posits “I think women have to develop courage, but if you develop try to develop your courage with smaller things ... one way to develop courage is to not entertain company who debase you. Don’t laugh at someone who is laughing at you or putting you down. Take offense when someone say’s “I hope you won’t pick offence” then you probably will be Maya Angelou” (131). From this quote, it is crystal clear that Bloom builds in women, a strong sense of courage that will ensure the breaking of the hegemonic walls around them as constructed by society and patriarchal order. African-American women should be assertive and should not condone mistreatment from anyone.

Black identity formation in repression refers to a state whereby people of African descent usually referred to as Black try to define themselves using language, culture and religion. This is to enable them create a name and a voice for themselves in an environment where they are only to be seen and not heard. In other words, they lack an identity thus a quest for identity formation is

mandatory. In their works, African-American writers incorporate the theme of identity by portraying situations, events, concepts and trends in the society which make them subjugated and oppressed. Hence they try to show ways that their identity can be found amidst their repressed state.

LeRoi Jones posits that “ In order for the Black man in the West to absolutely know himself, he must first see himself as culturally separate from the Whiteman” (130). This means that for the Blacks to form an identity, they must first realize that they have no identity while their culture, language and history is being submerged by the white man. Thus Maya Angelou in her poems embarks on the quest of reclaiming the lost identity of African-Americans. Maya is specifically concerned about the experiences of African-American females; hence she can be termed a Black feminist writer. In her poem “The calling of Names” Maya reveals the general experience of racism meted out on all African-Americans females; hence she can be termed a Black feminist writer in her poem.

The African-Americans can be said to have no identity since they have no name to themselves other than the different names that are ascribed to them by the white oppressors. Stanza (1) of the poem confirms this. “He went to being called a colored after answering to her nigger. Now that is a big jump anyway you finger”... (46). These different names have nothing to reconnect them to their history, culture and religion leading to their loss of identity. This evokes sympathy and pity for them by their audience. Kernodle, posits that these audience sometimes “share their common plight as they try to discover or retain their dignity in a society that denies them the means of earning the respect they so desperately need” (203). This means that the quest for identity by African-Americans is still on-going and it is not until their dignity is retained and respect earned; they won’t give up on the quest for identity formation.

In another poem by Maya Angelou entitled “still I rise”, the speaker speaks in courageous tone. The speaker speaks about the injustices meted out to the Africans-Americans and her resolution to move forward despite the ordeals. The speaker is not bothered or threatened by the horrible experiences. Instead, she triumphantly asserts “still I’ll rise. She repeatedly uses the expression “I’ll rise to mean a ray of hope for African-American females. It is a kind of admonition not to give up on their predicament but should strive to stand tall amidst their precarious existential conditions. Confidently, the speaker asserts that “Just like moons and like suns with the certainty of tides/just like hopes springing high/Still I’ll rise (163). This expression is replete with doggedness which is a feature of the black race.

Stuart Hall postulates that “Race is thus, the modality..... in which class is lived, the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and fought...” (341). From this quote; we can see that class distinction is brought about by race whereby the upper class sees the lower class as inferiors to them. In Maya Angelou’s poem entitled “Equality”, although the theme of racism is noted there generally for all African-

Americans to see however, the speaker's emphasis dwells on gender discrimination (bias). Stanza 4 says; You announce my ways are woman,/That I fly from man to man/But if I'm just a shadow to you/Could you ever understand? (232). This stanza, explores the negative images of African-American females portrayed by their men in which they call the females flirts.

The expression "that if I'm just a shadow to you", shows that the Black woman's identity is non-existent. To both white and Black males, the Black females are not seen as their equals but regarded as inferior as a result of gender. Thus the poet personae calls for equality among all African-Americans males and females alike. Stanza (6) says "Equality and I will be free /Equality and will be free" (232). Thus, the personae is saying here that until African-Americans see themselves as equals, their quest for identity will never achieve result. In this poem, the poet uses equality among both gender (male and female) as a yardstick for the reconstruction of an identity that has been lost.

It has been discovered that Blacks generally are yet to find their place in America because racism; especially the type which Joe Feagin and Clairece Feagin describe as "ideological racism" (6) which uses a group's physical characteristics to determine the superiority and or otherwise of the group along intelligence. Hence Langston Hughes in his article titled "The Negro Artist and Racial Mountain" draws our attention to the image of "a very high mountain indeed for the would-be-Negro artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people" (1268). This means obstacles and predicaments in the form of oppression of various kinds that plague African-Americans are referred to as "high mountain" that they have to overcome and emerge triumphantly in order for their identity to be reconstructed and reclaimed.

In the poem "phenomenal woman", Maya again, explores the experiences of African-American woman. Here, the speaker speaks on how the different physical qualities possessed by the black female as attracted men to have thought of having sexual relationships with her. The poet personae posits:

*It's in the reach of my arm
The span of my step
The curl of my lips
I'm a woman
Phenomenally
Phenomenal woman
That's me (130-131).*

Thus these qualities attributed to the Black females make them look impressive. More so, although the speaker says in stanza (1) "I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size" she still carries herself high and she is not intimidated by the male gender. The speaker here values her inner beauty by saying that although she can't term herself a beautiful woman; men still hover around her like swarm of honey bees and fail on their knees. Thus in this poem, the personae is

giving advice to the marginalized African-American females that they should not die in silence but need to stay strong despite the oppression so that men will worship at their feet. In doing so, they have succeeded in creating an identity for themselves because they would be recognized and revered by the male gender.

Lois Tyson, asserts that:

African-American literature posit common themes such s “reclaiming the African past...surviving the ordeal of slavery. The quest for freedom from Slavery and other forms of oppression, the quest for literacy, the experience Of African-Americans during the civil war and reconstruction, surviving life in the south under segregation, the problems and conflicts of mulatoes in a Racist society, the difficulties of economic survival, urbanization, alienation and the quest to reconcile double consciousness, the role of religion in Personal and collective survival and the importance of cultural heritage (385).

Hence the aim of African-Americans in summary entails the action geared toward reclaiming the African past which has led to the quest for identity formation among them.

In another poem entitled “life dose not fight me”, the speaker speaks on oppression brought about by racism. Here, oppression is generally carried out on broth African-American males and females. But one encouraging thing is that the speaker repeatedly say “life dose not fright me at all” (167-168). Stanza one posits:

*Shadows on wall
Noises down the wall
Life dose not fright me at all
Bad dog barking loud
Big ghost in the cloud
Life dose not fright me at all. (167-168)*

She goes further to say that no amount of oppression scares or weakens her and if at all she is afraid, it is all in her dream. The speaker further posits that she can emerge triumphant despite the obstacle. Her expression “I can walk the oceans floor and never have to breathe” (167-168) confirms her resilience. In the poem, the speaker is saying that until African-Africans come out of their shell of fear and repression, they can never form a unique identity for themselves.

Tonia, Umoren posits that Aidoo Ama ata in her play titled *Anowa* says that feminism commits its energies to “...exposing the sexist tragedy of woman’s history; protesting the on-going degradation of woman, celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities, and above all unfolding a revolutionary (positive thinkers and writers of woman’s impressions) vision of the role” (16). This means women writers relentlessly strive to elevate the status of women by

celebrating her physical and intellectual capabilities. These writers also try to debunk the erroneous perception that the male gender has about the women.

Tonia, Umoren's perception holds that the dehumanizing representations of women place them in domestic sphere and one can find connection with how Umoren's critical perception realigns with Maya's. The poem "woman work" by Maya explores the roles the patriarchal order has given to the female because of her gender. Stanza one reveals this.

*I've got the children to tend
The cloth to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry
I got a company to feed
The garden to weed
I've got the shirt to press
The tots to dress
The cane to be cut
I got to clean up this hut
Then see about the sick
And the cotton to pick (153-154)*

From this stanza, we see the array of activities bequeathed to the female gender choked up with several activities that involve her attending to others and having no time for herself. Her life is not her own because she is in constants servitude to others thus she has no identity.

Knowing this, she calls on agents of nature to deliver her from this predicament since it is beyond human intervention. Thus stanza two three and four of the poem explores this "Shine on me, sun shine/Rain on me, me/Fall softly, dew drops/And cool my blow again/Storm, blow me from here/You're all that I can call my own." (153-154). Another of Maya Angelou's poem of which explores the general experiences faced by African-Americans is "caged bird". This poem exposes the oppression and repression of Blacks brought about by racism, in this poem, the speaker being by sating the freedom in which a free bird enjoy unlike the "caged bird". It says "A free bird leaps on the back of the wind /And float downstream till the current ends /And dips his wing in the orange sun rays/And dares to claim the sky." (194-195). Here, a free bird is free to indulge in whatever it likes without hindrances but unlike the free bird which is at liberty to wander about freely, the "cage bird" is restricted hence, helpless.

The term "caged bird" refers to African- Americans who are held down by the chains of oppression. Their lives are monitored and dictated to and their progress in hindered by activities

carried out on them by the oppressors. They are in a cage where they can't breathe freely nor express themselves. Thus means they live a life of servitude and subservience to the oppressors.

Stanza two says "But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage /Can seldom see through his bars of rage/His wings are clipped and his feet are tied (194-195). One thing that the speaker points out is that despite being held down, the "caged bird" still sings. This means it yearns for freedom. In extension, African-Americans despite being held down by the shackles of oppression and racism are still striving toward becoming free just like the "caged bird" yearning for freedom.

Tonia, Umoren asserts that "the African woman writer calls for and strives towards the creation of more credible images of women as dictated by the changing times" (12). This means women writers in their works portray the images of women in positive light in contrast to male writers who view them in negative light. Furthermore, women writers explore the hypocrisies and evil acts perpetrated by men in their works. For instance, in the poem "men" Maya speaks on the African-American female experiences. In this poem, the speaker reveals the sexual perversion of "men" who engage under aged girls in sexual act.

In the poem "when I think about myself" by Maya Angelou, she explores theme of humiliation and disrespect experienced by the speaker from the children of the oppressors. These evokes in the speaker when she says "Today is yet to come in Arkansas" (142). Thus, the Blacks living in Arkansas are robbed of their identity hence the need for identity formation by these Blacks.

In the same poem entitled "when I think about myself", Maya Angelou explores humiliation and disrespect experienced by the speaker from the children of the oppressors. This evokes in the speaker a sense of low self-esteem in which she views her life as a joke and does not think high of herself. Her life is portrayed as laughable experience at the age of 60, the child she works for refers to her as a "girl". Stanza 2 of the poem confirms this;

*"sixty years in these folk world
The child I works for calls me girl
I say yes ma'am
For working's sake
Too proud to bend
Too poor to break
I laugh until my stomach ache
When I think about myself" (29)*

No respect is accorded to her because she is seen as an inferior being as a result of her race. She goes further to state the situations of the Blacks who are being exploited and manipulated to work for the oppressors and at the end; they have no reward for their service. Line 8-9 of stanza

which reads: “they grow grass and fruits but eat the rind” (29) attests to how the labour of Blacks are exploited by the white race.

Carol Boyce Davies asserts that “For because we were/are products of separations and dislocation and dismembering people of African descent in the Americas historically, we have sought reconnection from the flying back stories which originated in slavery... this need to reconnect and re-member... has been a central impulse in the structuring of black thought” (17).

This means that the African-Americans aim of reconnecting to their past has been an ambition which has never been forgotten. This reconnection will establish what Modestus Onyeaghalaji describes as the sense of “Self-regeneration” (178) for the black people; particularly the black women across the globe. Thus they embark on the quest for identity formation in order to find their root and reach historical reconnection.

The Place of Language and Literary Devices in Meaning making in Maya Angelou’s Poetry

Imagery/Symbols

For a better understanding of how imagery and symbol are deployed by Maya Angelou to create meaning in her poetry, it is pertinent for one to briefly engage M. H. Abrams and Godfrey G. Harpham’s views on these literary devices highlighted above. In their views:

Imagery as (that is, images taken collectively) is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other works of literature whether by literal description, by allusion or in the vehicles (the secondary references) of the similes and metaphors ... “imagery” in this usage, include not only visual sense qualities, but also qualities that are auditory, tactile (touch), thermal beat and (old), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), and kinesthetic (sensations movement) (169).

Their position above means that imagery concretizes objects in the mind and brings same object(s) to reach sensory effect. Imagery, if extended, can accommodate not only simile or allusions but metaphoric presence as well.

Symbolism refers to the use of signs and secretly coded word or phrase in a work of art. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey G. Harpham, refer to symbolism by saying: “In discussing literature, the term symbol is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in turn signifies something or suggests, a range of reference beyond itself” (394).

They further posit that “Symbols however transfer a phenomenon into idea, the idea into an image and in such a way that the idea remains always infinitely active and unapproached in the image and even if expressed in all languages, still would remain inexpressible (396).”

Maya Angelou in the poems under study, makes use of some symbols/images to depict the oppression and the hardship African-Americans are going through in the U.S.A. She also uses some images/symbols to show the marginalized position of the Black females in the U.S.A and the activities of Blacks aimed at striving for freedom and attaining an elevated status in the society.

Grace Okereke describes Black women's drive for an elevated status as a form of "...calculated resistance of ... dictatorial agenda" (261). The dictatorial agenda as used in the assertion above captures patriarchal dominance of the female gender which must be resisted by black women. In the poem "The calling of names", we can see images of discrimination and racism through the use of symbols that depict them. The word "colored man", Negro, "dark-brown skin", "Nigguh", Nigger are all symbols of racism and imageries of oppression. Also the use of capital letter "N" refers to the letter symbol with which Blacks are associated with by the Whites. This connotes loss of identity.

In the poem "phenomenal woman", we see the poet personae using imagery/symbols that depict the feminine gender. Through these symbols, the Black female physical qualities are explored. Thus, the mentioning of body parts such as lips and arms are all symbols for human, while the description such as the reach of my arms, the span of my hips, the curl of my lips, all portray the characteristics of a phenomenal woman which makes her different from the men. Also expression such as 'hive of bees' is used to symbolize all class of men who flock around the speaker as a result of her being phenomenal.

In the poem "My Arkansas" images/symbols that portray violence and oppression are shown. Expression like "*red earth*" symbolizes a world that reeks of bloodshed. Also, the word "*earth*" in the poem symbolizes the entire area of Arkansas where violence and oppression is at its peak. It also connotes hope while "today" symbolizes a brighter future.

In the poem "woman work", images/symbols that depict domestic chores and woman's responsibility in the society is shown. Words such as "children", "clothes", "floor", "chicken", "baby", "company", "garden", "cane", all depict the women's responsibilities which also depict the image of suffering/oppression faced by the Black females. We also have the image that connotes nature. Thus, the use of words such as "sunshine", "rain", "dewdrops", "storm", "snowflakes", "curving sky", "mountains", "oceans", "leaf stone", moon all symbolize nature.

In the poem "Still I rise", imagery/symbols that reveal the Black female oppressive state is explored. Thus words such as "dirt", "teardrops", and "slave" are all symbols oppression and dehumanization. The word slave symbolizes the oppressed African-American generally and the female gender that is constantly marginalized in particular. Imagery of triumph and confidence is brought up by words such as sassiness, omwells, moons, sons, diamond and black ocean. 'Hut' in the poem symbolizes slavery/suffering. The poem "life doesn't frighten me" also reveals the elements of oppression using images/symbols such as "shadows baddogs", "big ghost", "mother

Goose”, “lions”. They all depict agents of oppression that make the life of African-Americans unbearable. The expression “new classroom” symbolizes the site of oppression, magic charm”, ocean floor symbolizes fearlessness and courage amidst these oppressions.

“Caged bird” by Maya Angelou is also replete with images/symbols that portray enslavement and oppression faced by African-Americans. Thus words like cage, bars clipped, tied all show imprisonment. The caged bird is used to symbolize all African-Americans that are heavily oppressed daily. The word “singing” used in the poem is an imagery for the yearning for emancipation by these suffering African-Americans. In the poem “Equality”, the poet again uses symbols/images that depict gender inequality. Images such as “blindness” and “padding” are all means through which the Black females are seen as inferior. While words such as “tempo”, “blood”, “drum beat” (heart beat) are images employed to reveal that women are the same as men; since all human beings possess these qualities.

In the poem “men”, men symbolize the male folk either Black or White. The word fifteen years shows someone who is less than adult “Raw egg” symbolizes innocence and the state of naivety. Curtains symbolize hiding places. In the poem “when I think about myself”, the poet persona uses imagery/symbolism that portray humiliation and subservient lifestyle of the African-American towards their white maters. The words “sixty years” symbolizes an advanced person, child in the poem represents the employer who is a young white personality. Ma’dam symbolizes degradation, “yes” shows servitude, “folk” symbolizes African-Americans, fruit symbolizes hard work, “rind” means waste of effort, “dance”, song, “laugh” are all images that the poet employs to act as a form of momentary relief from the hard life of the African-Americans.

The Use of Belligerent Diction

Belligerent diction refers to the use of angry and aggressive words in order to reveal one’s emotion and state of mind. A belligerent language is confrontational and it is used by the oppressed (African-Americans) as a tool of liberation and assertion. This is because language is the primary articulator of a poet’s consciousness. This status and relation of language to experience is made clearer by the Hallidanian position on language and experience which holds that “...the speaker or writer embodies in language his experience of the phenomena of the real world; and this includes his experience of internal world of his own consciousness: his reactions, cognitions and perceptions...” (327). The Hallidanian ideation above implies that language is to a poet’s experience what blood is to the human body system.

Jacob Cohen, states that “Dominant language reflects and perpetuates a nation’s culture structured on hierarchical binarisms which institute distinctions and separation for purpose of exploitation, to name is to claim, classify, dominate ... As Simon de Beauvieux ... It invents otherness and woman is a cultural constructed other, deniel, subjected reified and subordinated” (3). This means that the above construction is a lamentation on the societal practice that allows the

definition of women only through the angle and perception of men. Thus a woman is subordinated and has no voice since society has constructed her femininity as an appendage of masculinity. Hence Maya Angelou in the poem under study uses belligerent diction to put a stop to dehumanized treatments meted out to the Black females by males generally. In the poem “phenomenal woman”, the expression “my head’s no bowed” shows courage and pride. Here, the speaker uses this to say no to the subservient lifestyle lived by the Black females that make them to be constantly oppressed by the male gender. She goes ahead to use rhetorical question like “why are you beset gloom”, which shows derogation towards the male gender. In life “doesn’t frighten me”, the expression ‘mean old mother goose’ and ‘dragons breathing flame’, are all derogatory terms used in referring to the White oppressors. The poet uses these belligerent dictions to show her emotional state of mind revealing anger and detest toward her oppressed state. In the poem “Equality” the male folk are being referred to as blind people by the use of this expression “take the blinders from your vision and deaf people/take the padding from your vision”. These expression are use to portray attitude of “men” who have decided to act blind and pay deaf ears towards the Black females’ striving for equality. In the poem “Men”, the male gender is being portrayed in negative light, belligerent diction such as “shoulders high”, means the attitude of “pride” which Black men have decided to adopt in their relationship with Black females. Maya Angelou in her use of Belligerent diction in this poem has been able to reveal to the African-America females in particular, that they are not to die in silence and servitude. They can create an identity for themselves if only they will muscle the courage to voice out their concerns and strive to yearn for freedom by being confident and pro-active.

Conclusion

Poetry serves as the mirror of the society. It X-rays pertinent issues that plague mankind in the society from time to time by revealing the factors that are responsible for these societal problems that disrupt the normal functioning of the society and individual. Consequently, poets in their poems show numerous problems faced by some human in a particular society. Issues like man’s inhumane treatment towards their fellowman, oppression which can be in the form of class stratification, discrimination as a result of skin colour, race and gender are engaged. African-American writers (poets) explore common trends prevalent in African-American societies through their poems. One common trend among them is the quest for identity. Maya Angelou who is one of such poets explores the theme of identity formation in repression in her poems. In the poems of Maya Angelou that have been considered in this research, the poet shows the oppressed and subjugated conditions of African-Americans in the USA which put them in constant state of oppression. The poems did not only show the oppression and subjugated state of the Black in the USA but equip suffering Blacks to be self-aware and conscious so that they can create an identity for themselves amidst the oddities that characterize their conditions. Maya’s poetry awakens the sleeping minds of Blacks and ignites fire in their hearts in order for them to unite and fight against the evil of repression and inequality.

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