



DIFFERENCES IN ADDRESSING THE GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE WRITINGS OF MAYA ANGELOU AND SYLVIA PLATH: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF STILL I RISE AND LADY LAZARUS

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath and Maya Angelou are celebrated postmodern feminist writers. Their works are known for women activism. This study tries to explain how far both the writers differ in using and treating feminism in their writings. This paper also tries to explain to how far Maya Angelou is being optimistic when discusses subjects like racism and feminism in her writings and how Sylvia Plath follows a pessimistic approach in dealing with gender discrimination. The study includes a comparison of the way of integrating autobiographical elements in their poetry as well.

Keywords: Black feminism, White Feminism, Optimism, Pessimism, Racism, Autobiographical elements in poetry, Maya Angelou, Sylvia Plath

Introduction

Though both the poets are known for marking their identity as women activists in the literary world by addressing the gender discrimination in terms of their personal experiences; the differences in the method of addressing the issues are clear in their poetry. Even though both the poet favors feminism, they differ in approaching the same. This paper identifies and discusses the varied use of feminist approaches in the poetry *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou and *Lady Lazarus* by Sylvia Plath.

In the contemporary era, although there is a huge outbreak of giving liberty and freedom to women, the works of Sylvia Plath and Maya Angelou depict the sufferings faced by women in every corner of life. Through their problems, they portray how in general woman suffer to build up a self-identity to come out of the general norms declared by the society and their works also depicts the

differences in the feministic approaches showing the presence of a vast difference in the thoughts of woman. In the current scenario, these poets show the need for every women to stand amidst the created odds and they serve an inspiration through their works by using two different approaches to achieve the same goals.

Researchers have identified the strong feminist voice of Maya Angelou and Sylvia Plath. Maya in her autobiography, explained the racist discrimination, childhood abuse and family member's advice to keep silence about the abuse that she experienced. She always showed courage to discuss the dilemma she had gone through, in public.

This paper compares the poems *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou and *Lady Lazarus* by Sylvia Plath to identify how the writers have used black feminism and white feminism in their works. From decades, all genres of literature give prominence to the field of feminism but a comparison between the different

kinds of feminism would give more insights on how the topics related to gender discrimination is being explained by black and white feminist writers.

This paper aims to identify how the poets uses the optimistic elements and pessimistic elements to convey the common concept of gender discrimination but in different ways. It also focuses on how the optimistic elements give way to black feminism and pessimistic to white feminism, while comparing the poems, Still I Rise by Maya Angelou and Lady Lazarus by Sylvia Plath. The approach used to identify the problem, also consciously tries to explain the other aspects of how the thoughts of white and black women are being expressed and interpreted in terms of personal and cultural experiences.

Discussion

The very well-known African American writer Maya Angelou has registered her space in the literary world with her versatile treatment of the topics such as the struggles of racial discrimination, gender inequality, and survival for existence in the contemporary society. (K. SASIDHERI & M. VIJAYA LAKSHMI 2013). The poem Still I rise is first published in the book *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems* by an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. in 1978. "Many African-American texts were written to create a particular political impact" (Walker, 1995). The poem, Still I rise, bears poet's own experiences along with the narration of political impact. In the poem, the female narrator proudly claims her self-esteem which is cultivated by her in the middle of unknown souls who wanted to see her betrayed. Maya has used feministic and anti- black racist images in the poem, Still I rise.

Sylvia Plath was a dynamic poet born and raised in a male patriarchal society and this influence and experience made her a well-known 20th century poet. All her poems generally explore her own mental traumas that she suffered by living in the society where woman were treated as a commodity of marriage. As a woman poet, she always struggled on her journey towards exploring and finding the inner truth and self-identity and finally left her life in tranquility. Lady Lazarus is an autobiographical poem, where Sylvia Plath points

out on the aspect of how hard it is to sustain being a woman, where the ultimate escape to freedom turns out to be death. The poet is unenthusiastic on her views on life and directs the readers by stating that the only way to get self-revelation and freedom is through her own death. "The shocking and confusing content of Plath's "Lady Lazarus," reflects the poet's own vision of the upheavals of the twentieth century." (Mohammad, 2019.)

"The poet becomes representative of the personal crisis in modern life, and his[or her] own experience of confusion and pain becomes exemplary." (1979, p.143). Sylvia Plath initiates the poem by detailing her own suicidal attempts that she committed and describes death an art that she is good at performing. It is only in the latter half of the poem, she points out her hatred towards the men in her society. The powerful words of Sylvia Plath in the last few lines clearly depict her revulsion that she has towards men. " Out of ash I rise with my red hair And I eat men like air."

Though Maya and Sylvia treat the same theme using the same approach, both of them differs in shaping the poem with the feministic tool. Maya mix up the anti-black racist images along with feministic whereas Sylvia follows the main stream of feminism.

Discussion

Catherine A Dobris mentioned that, two kinds of feministic approaches are common, the mainstream feminism which tries to address the issues of marginalized women and other few feminists who tries to address the *significance of race, class, color, religion, and other factors as shaping the identity of Women* (Dobris, 1996).

Connecting the works Maya Angelou's poem Still I rise and Sylvia Plath's Lady Lazarus, we can see a lot of similarities in both these poems as both the poets approach their writing with feminism as the main threshold point to convey their outlooks. Both of them address the patriarchal society of men in general, where the women are marginalized and crushed to the corner. However, on a deeper insight into the poem we could see a wide array of divergence in the way they react to the societal

norms, even though the centrifugal force that holds both the poems is feminism. Considering Maya Angelou's *Still I rise*, we can see how a woman stands for her privileges in the society and how she spreads out the inspiration and motivation to the other women. Maya Angelou's poem *Still I rise*, not only depicts the way the poet contributes towards shaping the identity of woman in general by being a motivational force to them, but also the poet stands for her liberal rights which has been offended not only for women but for her whole race and society. As we move through the lines of the poem *Still I rise*, we can see how optimistically the poet deals with the issues of women marginalization and racism by being a bridge of change and rousing the reader not to lose their hope. Maya Angelou in the poem says, "Out of the huts of history's shame, I rise. Up from a past that's rooted in pain, I rise." (Angelou, 29-32) Here, we could see how as a woman she stands for her rights to be free and how the poet inspires and tries to bring a change into the out-casted black women marginalization. An entirely different approach of feministic attitude is visible in the poem *Lady Lazarus* written by Sylvia Plath. If black feminism and optimistic attitude of representing the gender issues was what we saw in Maya Angelou's, *Still I rise* poem, here we can see how differently Sylvia address her readers to bring a change into the male chauvinistic society. Sylvia on the other hand, do motivate her women readers to stand up for their rights by being a representative for the same, as she being the first woman to come forward and speak up against the societal norms and pressure build by the men, we could a massive outbreak of pessimism in the lines of *Lady Lazarus*. The poet is deeply pulled aside by the conventions of the male world, the poet feels the only way to escape into the arms of freedom is by being in the final world of tranquility. Sylvia through her lines, brings out a bit of fantasy to build in hope by indicating that she will rise like the phoenix from her own ashes and then fight against men. "Out of the ash, I rise with my red hair, And I eat men like air." (Plath, 82- 84) Though both the poets strive for the liberty of women in general, we could see how Maya Angelou inspires the whole society and women together by bringing positive vibrancies through her words and how Sylvia Plath

represents the women of her society by being a representative to portray the sufferings.

Sally J. Scholz says, "Feminist methodology takes the lives of women as central" (Sally, J.S. 2012). On a deeper analysis into the poem *Lady Lazarus* written by Sylvia Plath, we can see how the poet represents the societal pressures imposed on any woman by the male patriarchal society. The poet brings in a wide range of biblical allusions to showcase how downtrodden they are in the hands of the men superiors. The poet represents herself as the Jew who suffered under the massive rules of the Nazis. Throughout the poem, we could see how disturbed the poet is and how she believes that the only change she could bring in her life and the only way she could escape the harsh realities and societal norms is through her own death. The feministic ideology of the right to be equal is represented throughout the poem; still the poet does not bring out an optimistic ray of hope, rather the poet say that she will find freedom through death and then will rise from her death and finally pay vengeance to the men folk who wounded her throughout her life. This feministic approach brought out by Sylvia Plath, brings in a negative impact to the women readers, as the light of hope to stand for their rights in real life, provided by the poet is comparatively less when compared to the high level of thoughts towards the doorway of escapism.

A black feminist epistemology is contextual and contingent, and it examines the differentiated and variable organizing logics of race, class and gender and other social divisions such as sexuality, age, disability, culture, religion, and belief that structure women's lives in different historical times (Yuval-Davis 2006)

The elements of autobiography in the poems, *Still I rise* and *Lady Lazarus* stands at the peak by bringing both the poems closer for being representative and realistic poem of the contemporary world. An extensive look into the poems will result in the portrayal of two levels of feministic approaches used by both the poets. We can see how Sylvia Plath tries to bring in the courage to bring out the voice of women in her society by being a self representative of the marginalized. On

the other hand, Maya Angelou portrays another scenario of the same feministic movement by standing for her downtrodden race in a whole along with the marginalized women of her society. In Maya Angelou's poems, we can see the representation of black feminism wherein the poet tries to put in an effort to build hope and bring change to the racially oppressed women in general. The poet tries to show her readers how race, culture, religion and beliefs have a high impact on the discrimination faced by black women. Through her words, Maya Angelou tries to mark a new change in the age old pages of history and the pre-delivered rules and norms of the society. "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." (Angelou, 1-4). The poet thus tries to build in a positive beam of hope not only to the women but being an oppressed woman she gives hope both to the women of her society as well as to her black race in general.

Conclusion

The contemporary feminist writer Sylvia Plath and Maya Angelou had widely stood for the empowerment of women through their works yet the approach that the both the poets used in their works are completely different even though they belong to the genre of feminism. This study limited the comparison with identifying the similarities but not explaining them. A deeper insight into more of their works may prove how the contemporary women writers framed the realistic portrayal of life through their writings apart from the genres of fancy and philosophy.

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