

Existentialism: A Strive for Identity in the Select Poems of Maya Angelou

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Abstract

Existentialism is an approach that emphasizes human existence. It opposes rationalist tradition and culture by emphasizing action, and freedom, and choosing them as important to human existence. This study is an attempt to unveil Maya Angelou's existential themes in her poems. Angelou, as an African-American poet naturally possess the existentialistic attitude and fought for the freedom of her community. The selected poems for this study are: "*Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition*", "*Harlem Hopscotch*", and "*Africa*". Most of her poems are found with the themes of pain, hope, quest for freedom and self-love. This paper examines an in-depth analysis of Angelou's select poems which aids to explore the world of Angelou where she lives with her own perspectives of life and strives for the freedom of humanity. Her writings are the mirror of herself. The paper concludes by showing how Angelou has turned all of her struggles into victories and how she has battled for black liberation and became an icon among the blacks'.

Keywords: Existentialist, hope, freedom, self-love, icon

1. Introduction

The word "diaspora" comes from the Greek words "dia" which means "through" and "speirein" which means "to scatter" and "to disseminate about". According to Merriam Webster online, diaspora is the movement, emigration, or dispersion of a people away from an existing or traditional homeland. A diaspora is a group of people who have migrated from their homeland to different parts of the world, spreading their culture along the way. Sub-Saharan Africans are one of the greatest diasporas of contemporary times, dating back several centuries before the Atlantic Slave Trade. During the Atlantic Slave Trade, which lasted from 16th to 19th centuries, twelve million people from West and Central Africa were held captive and shifted as slaves to the Americas.

Millions of Africans have migrated to Europe and Asia in search of employment opportunities to contribute to these regions' economic development. They exerted a notable influence on the culture, politics, and regional factors of the Americas. Migration has had a significant negative impact on women and children. They experienced both physical and mental health consequences and this condition results in traumatic events. Language enables diasporic individuals to overcome traumatic experiences. The individuals discuss their adversities, hardships, enslavement, mistreatment, and various encounters, enabling them to articulate their emotions and transcend their circumstances with optimism and self-assurance.

African-American literature refers to the literary works produced by individuals of African descent in the Americas. The vernacular tradition forms the basis of African American literature. Examples of oral expression in the tradition include spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues, and rap. The literary contributions of 18th-century writers encompass a wide range of works, including those by Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, as well as slave narratives, Harlem Renaissance literature, and contemporary authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Walter Mosley. These writers collectively represent the entirety of African literature. Themes commonly found in African American and African Diaspora literature encompass alienation, displacement, existentialism, nostalgia, and the pursuit of identity and freedom. It also examines the phenomena of cultural amalgamation and disintegration.

This paper focuses on the theme of 'Existentialism' in Maya Angelou's poems. Existentialism is a philosophical framework that emphasizes the individual's existence as a self-determining and accountable being, capable of shaping their own development through the exercise of their will. It highlights the significance of action, freedom, and decision-making as essential aspects of human existence. This movement involves humans determining their own life's meaning in spite of existing in an irrational universe.

Maya Angelou, an African-American writer, poet, singer, dancer, producer, essayist, civil right activist, despite living in a suppressed state, fought for her freedom and strives for her identity in the whites' land. Her writings are the strong weapon to fight against the ruling community. Her interest towards art forms gives her the space to consciously ponder on things that had pained her. She had courage to rise upon and became an icon of hope and inspiration. She also gives courage and a sense of companionship to the readers.

Maya Angelou in one of her interviews says, "If one has the fortune, good or bad, to stay alive one endures, but to continue to write books

and get them out – that’s the productivity and I think that is important to link with endurance” (Angelou 44). From these lines, it is clear that the process of writing helps people to gain confidence and endurance from their suppression.

The study aims at finding answers to two significant questions:

- 1) What are the existential themes found in the poems of Angelou?
- 2) How writing turns out to be a medium of survival for Angelou?

2. Literature Review

Shrestha and Chamling (2021) investigated Angelou’s writings in which she surpasses the traumatic occurrences around and within her. The study did not mention any poems in particular but assessed them with a resilient tone. The research illustrated how African-American woman Angelou endured personal and collective trauma while creating her identity. Angelou was presented as an idol of fortitude and adaptability, and her life and growth path would not have been fulfilled without her perseverance. The internalisation of trauma enabled her to achieve her drive for survival and development. This study shows how trauma that shaped Angelou’s artistic works (poems) is intrinsically tied to them. The study demonstrated how writing enabled Angelou to comprehend her past and carve a way through it, making her a symbol of optimism, bravery, and resiliency.

Eid (2020) emphasised the unique existence of black women in the enslaved nation (America). The study did not focus on any particular poem of Angelou but instead examined the theme of racial inequality in Maya Angelou’s writing. African-American poet Maya Angelou addressed what it meant to be a woman, a black person, and someone who lives in poverty. She claimed that she writes for people of her race and that her voice speaks for oppressed African-American men and women. Through her aggressive voice, she conveyed the attitude of triumph over hardship that permeated her political songs. Analysing Angelou’s poetry in depth reveals concerns with racial prejudice, misogyny, and social class. The aim of the study was to inquire Angelou’s poems as an expression of rebellion against the disparities in race and gender that plagued the African-American community.

Permatasari (2016) investigated discrimination against Negroid in Angelou’s poems “*Phenomenal Woman*”, “*Caged Bird*”, and “*Still I Rise*”. The study explored Angelou’s poetry and takes a feminist stance while discussing racial concerns. The study placed a strong emphasis on feminist criticism and conducted a women-centric analysis of the poems. The research was carried out using feminist theory, as well as biographical and historical methodologies. The study has identified various kinds of feminism in the poems and has taken account of Angelou’s criticism of the current socio-economic structure that exists among African-Americans using Kennedy and Gioia’s theory. The poems “*Still I Rise*” and “*Caged Bird*” comprise ‘Marxist’ and ‘Radical’ feminism, whereas “*Phenomenal Women*” has resulted in ‘Liberal’ feminism. In her feminist narrative, Angelou depicted herself as a pioneering figure in the movement for the liberation of black people and the condemnation of slavery. Angelou’s poetry suggests that she believed in the potential for black people to achieve liberty.

Janouskova (2005) draws attention to the theme of survival in Maya Angelou’s poetry. Instead of focusing on a single poem from Angelou’s collection, the study analyses each poem and organises them based on terms relating to survival. Black women’s adversity, dignity, and fortitude displayed their belief in survival. Since Angelou delivered various odes as poems that included humour and religious thoughts, the concept of survival is defined in her poetry through the sense of humour, melody, and religious elements. According to the study, Angelou’s poetry is well-known for establishing a story of their existence. Angelou emphasized the significance of a woman’s identity in their fight for liberty and how her grandmother lived as a light in a sea of anguish and chaos. In accordance with the analysis, most of Angelou’s writing addressed how culture affected behaviour among people.

3. Theoretical Framework

The framework used for this study of research is thematic qualitative analysis. Qualitative research is the study of social phenomena from the participant’s perspective in order to get more insight into a specific phenomenon, such as a belief, a process or even an environment (Gay 2006). Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis process that comprises examining a data set for repeated patterns to identify, evaluate, and report (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The main objective of the research is to find out the existential themes in the selected poems of Maya Angelou. The themes reveal her inner self as she endeavors to secure freedom for her community in America. Additionally, she explores how writing serves as a means to overcome personal trauma and cultivate hope and confidence. The objects of the study are the three select poems of Angelou: “*Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition*”, “*Harlem Hopscotch*”, and “*Africa*”.

4. Methods

This study employed a thematic analysis approach to examine the chosen poems. The study adopted an existentialistic perspective to evaluate the selected poems thematically. The researcher studied each of the poems closely to assess thematically. The themes of optimism, courage, the search for identity, and individuality were examined through this close reading.

5. Materials

Maya Angelou’s first notable Pulitzer Prize nominated poetry collection, “*Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘Fore I Die*” and her second volume of poetry, “*Oh Pray My Wings are Gonna Fit Me Well*” are the primary sources of data collection and analysis for the present study. For the specific purpose of the study, three poems: “*Times-Square- Shoeshine-Composition*”, “*Harlem Hopscotch*”, and

"Africa" were selected to be analyzed as they have the thematic representation of the existential situation. The selected poems were relevant to the study, as the setting of the poem depicted how blacks strive hard to live in the dominant white world and how hard they earn their identity in the dominant land. Most of the characters are depicted from the poets' era.

6. Findings

Themes prevalent in the select poems such as hope, courage, the quest for identity, and individuality display the elements of existentialism. In the poem "*Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition*", Maya Angelou describes how Africans are subjected to racism and oppression by white people and how they overcome it with determination, courage, and optimism. This poem describes a typical day in the life of an African-American shoe shiner from his point of view.

She employs the personal pronoun "I" throughout the poem, reflecting her projection of herself into the role of an African shoe-shiner. The acoustic components and structural changes add liveliness to the poems. The usage of vernacular language (dee luxe, ain't, wanta, 'em mister) aids in a better understanding of their tradition and culture.

I'm the best that ever done it (pow pow)
 that's my title and I won it (pow pow)
 I ain't lying, I'm the best (pow pow)
 Come and put me to the test (pow pow) (Angelou 30).

The phrase "I'm the best", is repeated twice to emphasize the significance of individuality and the tone remains confident. Repetition also denotes the traumatized state of the mind of the poet. The speaker asserted himself through self-realization by alleviating the traumatic state of his mind and his environment. The speaker retains pride despite the white man's refusal to pay for the service and humiliates him.

I ain't playing dozens mister (pow pow)
 You can give it to your sister (pow pow)
 Any way you want to read it (pow pow)
 Maybe it's your momma need it (pow pow) (Angelou 31).

In the above lines, the speaker satirizes the white people's economic superiority while simultaneously emphasizing the strength of the black people in the humiliated (oppressive) community. In the closing line, the poet demonstrates how everyone, regardless of skin color, can succeed and prosper through hard work.

In the second poem, "*Harlem Hopscotch*", Angelou compares life to a game of hopscotch and celebrates people's perseverance, determination, and desire to live. Additionally, the poet uses their dialect in this poem, yet the tone remains positive. The speaker describes the hopscotch game's rules in the opening stanza. The lines, "One foot down, then hop! It's hot / Good things for the ones that's got / Another jump, now to the left / Everybody for hisself" (Angelou 48), explains that life is a sequence of desperate leaps and landings interrupted by brief pauses.

Racial discrimination pressurizes the blacks, thus resulting in their hunger, poverty and unemployment. The lines,

Since you black, don't stick around
 Food is gone, the rent is due
 Curse and cry and then jump two
 All the people out of work (Angelou 48).

depicts the pitiful state of blacks, who does not have the chance of economic development in the land of supremacy. The speaker provides an inside look at the black residents of Harlem's underprivileged neighborhood. Since black people are racially and economically segregated inside the subjugated community of white supremacy, they have little opportunity for employment.

Here, the speaker motivates the blacks to work smarter to find a way out of the oppression. The lines,

Hold for three, then twist and jerk.
 Cross the line, they count you out.
 That's what hopping's all about.
 Both feet flat, the game is done.
 They think I lost. I think I won (Angelou 48).

She aims to achieve equality for both the races. The speaker concludes the poem with a triumphant note, "They think I lost. I think I won" (48). Her statements' assurance reveals her will to overcome the white people's discrimination and dominance. The speaker is proud of her race and wishes to improve a lot in black lives. Emilie. M. says,

"Her testimony was the power of endurance and hope, and she was relentless in urging us to be our better selves as individuals and as a nation. She also understands the importance of blending determination with play" (Townes 579).

Throughout her life, Angelou has worked tirelessly for the liberation of her people, particularly black women and children. She praises the value of their personality and exhorts them to focus on their self.

In her poem “Africa”, Maya Angelou elaborates on the metaphor of a lovely woman to describe the sorrow of the African continent. This poem is extensive in the use of rhetorical devices such as personification, metaphor, and repetition. The poem’s tone progressively changes from dejection to striving, reflecting the poet’s faith in the subjugated society and her courage and optimism.

The African continent is portrayed in the opening stanza as a lovely woman with two Niles as tears, mountains as breasts, and deserts as hair. The beauty of Africa has been captured through the poet’s eyes, who in her native country relish freedom in the hands of nature. The poem starts with a word “Thus”, indicating that the poet is telling a story of Africa. The lines, “deserts her hair / golden her feet / mountains her breasts”, picturizes Africa’s (continent) beauty to the readers and also the lines, “two Niles her tears / Thus she has lain / Black through the years” (Angelou 78), exhibits discrimination of African people only because of their skin color.

The repetition of the phrase “Thus she had/ has lain” thrice adds a strong note that the African continent is looked down and oppressed by the whites’ supremacy in a notion of otherness. In the lines, “took her daughters / sold her strong sons / churched her with Jesus”, the portrayal gets stiffened by exposing its’ other side of horrors, slave trade, sexual abuse and lack of religious freedom in the diasporic land. Africa has been laying down in a ruin because of the injustice done to her.

Now she is rising
remember her pain
remember the losses
her screams loud and vain
. . . now she is striding
although she had lain (Angelou 78).

The poem abruptly moves from the past (had lain) to the present in this passage (is rising). The poem’s tone becomes louder and more elevated. The continent, which was once blissfully dozing off, is now striving to overcome its oppression and move towards a more prosperous society. This alteration signifies a substantial change in people’s perspectives, which also has an impact on readers’ perspectives as well.

7. Conclusion

Maya Angelou, an African-American residing in Arkansas, encountered first-hand racism and prejudice. She experienced numerous distressing events and circumstances in her early life. At the age of three, she was sent to live with her grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, following her parents’ divorce. Initially, she yearns for her mother’s affection, leading to mental fragility. This marks the initial occurrence of a traumatic event in her life. Growing up in a racist environment, Angelou was sexually assaulted by her mother’s boyfriend when she was just eight years old. In retribution, Angelou’s relatives killed the boyfriend and as an immediate consequence, she was so startled that she couldn’t speak for a while. Mrs Flowers, Angelou’s tutor, helped her overcome her muteness by teaching her the importance of education.

She has endured multiple failed relationships, which has caused her to become distant from people. Angelou was strongly affected by her grandmother Mrs Henderson and her tutor Mrs Flowers. Despite experiencing agony and hardship, she succeeded as a singer, dancer, producer, screenwriter, actor, feminist, etc. Vivian Baxter, Angelou’s mother, was a representation of rebellion in contrast to Mrs Henderson, who consistently taught her to endure persecution. She disregards limitations and acts of her own volition. Her actions demonstrate her appreciation of her freedom and self-worth above all. Maya Angelou says,

“All my work, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith. While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated” (McPherson 1986).

Maya Angelou, as a literary writer, used books and other forms of artistic expression as an escape mechanism. Her works are an outlet for her emotions and experiences. Based on the findings, the researcher interprets the poet’s existentialist attitude through the themes used in her poems. It is clear from the thematic study, that the tone is still firm and commanding. All the three poems begin on a melancholy note and end on a vibrant, existential note. The utilization of the vernacular language significantly aids in the comprehension of her culture, heritage, and identity. The poet’s use of language skilfully carves out the struggle of blacks against racism and supremacy.

Angelou feels proud of how every black person has the sustaining spirit to rise and shine among the whites despite living in an oppressed community. Angelou firmly believes that everyone, irrespective of gender, skin colour, nationality, or identity succeeds and flourishes through hard work. Her poems serve as a driving force towards a better future and in addition inspire readers to overcome difficult times in their lives.

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