

Symbols of Anti-Racism in Maya Angelou's "Million Man March"

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Abstract

This research aims to track down Maya Angelou's anti-racism orientation in her poem "Million Man March" through analyzing the symbols that she manipulated in the poem. Angelou employs the symbolic technique as a figurative language to delineate the miserable reality of the Afro-Americans in the USA and to declare her refusal and rejection of all aspects of the white's racial discrimination that Afro-Americans have experienced and endured in their life. The researchers argue that Angelou in this poem uses two kinds of symbols: first those which reflect pessimistic reality of the black people and the second set of symbols delineate love, unity and joy. These two sets of symbols are contradictory but they emphasize how Angelou looks at both the past's miserable reality from one side and on the other side how she stresses the significance of the present which must not be usurped by that past.

Keywords: racism, symbols, optimism, pessimism, unity, love.

الدلالات الرمزية المناهضة للعنصرية في قصيدة مايا انجلو " مسيرة المليون رجل "

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ملخص البحث:

ان هذه الدراسة تتناول التوجه المناهض للتمييز العنصري للشاعرة الامريكية، الافريقية الاصل مايا انجلو، حيث ان الباحثين يبينان هذا التوجه للشاعرة من خلال الوقوف عند اللغة المجازية المتمثلة بالرمزية المستخدمة من قبل الشاعرة في قصيدتها "مسيرة المليون رجل". ان الباحثان في هذه الدراسة

يعملان على تشخيص اللغة الرمزية في القصيدة ومن ثم تحليلها وإيجاد النتائج المتمثلة في دلالاتها التي تشير إلى وصف الشاعر الدقيق للحياة التعيسة التي يعيشها الأمريكيون السود من أصل أفريقي في أميركا، كما تشير إلى رفضها ونبذها لسياسة التمييز العنصري التي يمارسها الأمريكيون من أصل أبيض بحقهم.

The History of the Afro-Americans in the USA: A Bird's Eye View

The dark history of the United States of America is laden with chronic exploitation of land, territories, resources, and human slavery. There is no doubt that without a basic understanding of the history of the Afro-Americans in the USA, it can be hard to grasp the connotation of the symbols employed by Maya Angelou in her poem "Million Man March". So, it is plausible to shed light on the history of the Afro-Americans in the Southern states prior to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. As far back as 1859, the United States was becoming increasingly polarized over the issue of slavery¹, and the division between Northern and Southern States. During the 1850s, there was a high degree of sectionalism in the US. The North and South were more loyal to their particular regions than to the nation as a whole. They were divided on social, economic, political values, and customs². The president Abraham Lincoln, who was considered an Anti-slavery activist and member of the Republican Party, set into motion the ideology from the Republican Party that the

expansion of slavery should not be allowed to expand into any more territories because it would inhibit free labor on free soil³. Southern Confederate States, referred to as slave states, succeeded from the Northern allied states known as the Union, and from 1861-1865 the American Civil War broke out⁴. On the 1st. of January 1863 President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation order that proclaimed all those enslaved in Confederate territory were to be forever free. He ordered the Army to free all those enslaved in the ten states that were still in rebellion, thus, applying to 3.1 million of the 4 million slaves in the US

at the time⁵. Regardless of the results of the Civil War in America, emancipated slaves still faced daily discrimination and inequality. They were regarded and treated as second-class citizens who faced massive rebellion from the still lingering mentality of white racist ideologies who sought to suppress the civil and voting rights of African Americans ,even with the ratification of the 13th, 14th & 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which made slavery illegal everywhere in the U.S.

Maya Angelou's Anti-Racism Perspective

Born in Marguerite Johnson in St Louis, Missouri on April 4, 1928, Maya Angelou is a black American actress, director, playwright, autobiographer and a poet. Angelou's efforts to react against the racial values of the twentieth century make her a prominent anti-racism writer of modern times. Her work for several media tackles the problems of racism and sexism⁶. Angelou had access to platforms which globally mobilized the message of the civil rights of the Afro-American community through media. This resource access allowed for the voice and stories of African-Americans to be heard on the other side of the world⁷. Angelou's life was characterized by the instability of her childhood and her family along with the challenge of being a black woman growing up in the 19th century America⁸. Thus, she has a gift of observing her environment and portraying vividly the life that she and the Afro-Americans have endured. She writes as a critical judge of the Afro-

Americans and she reflects their misery and misfortune in an intimate way in her poetry. In her book *I know why the caged bird sings*, Angelou sharply describes real life experiences and issues of racism, trauma, and discrimination as an Afro-American living in poverty in the US. In this book, Angelou rises above the status of victim and paints a true coming of age in her life transforming her position and status to one of influence and prestige⁹.

Figurative Language

Language can be classified as either literal or figurative¹⁰. The literal language means conveying exactly the actual meaning of the words while the figurative language is a way of saying one thing and meaning another and we can say what we want to say more vividly and forcefully by figures of speech than we can by saying directly¹¹. In this research, Maya Angelou's anti-racism orientation is deduced through analyzing the figurative language represented exclusively in symbols.

Symbols

In literature, the term "symbol" is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something or suggests a range of reference beyond itself¹². A symbol is a word that stands for a reality beyond itself¹³. The word symbol comes from the Greek word "symbolon" that means (indication or identification sign) and originally it denotes a piece of skeleton (or some other object) that has served for a personal identification. It is not rare that the same symbol is understood differently in different cultures, countries, and eras¹⁴. Symbols work by creating a penumbra of meaning; the meaning of the symbol cannot therefore be precisely circumscribed¹⁵. The Cross, for example, stands for grief and joy, darkness and victory, justice and mercy, and love. Symbols have always been handled by writers to express their beliefs and preoccupations of the world that have surrounded them¹⁶. Some symbols are conventional or public¹⁷; for example, the Cross, the Red and the Good Shepherd are determined within a particular culture. Some other symbols are private or personal in which the poet exploits widely shared association between an object or event or action and a particular concept¹⁸; for example, the general association of a peacock with a pride and climbing with effort or progress. Symbols are often rich and complex and their meanings are difficult to be captured accurately. It is difficult to determine what particular the poet has in mind. Although the poet may pin down the

meaning of a symbol to something fairly definite and precise, more often the symbol is so general in its meaning that it can suggest a great variety of specific meanings¹⁹. "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost, for instance, concerns some choice in life, but what choice? Was it a choice of profession? A choice of residence? Or a choice of mate? It may be any or none of these.

Angelou's "Million Man March": Text, Introduction to the Poem, and Analysis of the Symbols in the poem

Text

"Million Man March" by Maya Angelou (1995)

The night has been long,
The wound has been deep,
The pit has been dark,
And the walls have been steep.

Under a dead blue sky on a distant beach,
I was dragged by my braids just beyond your reach.
Your hands were tied, your mouth was bound,
You couldn't even call out my name.
You were helpless and so was I,
But unfortunately throughout history
You've worn a badge of shame.

I say, the night has been long,
The wound has been deep,
The pit has been dark
And the walls have been steep.

But today, voices of old spirit sound
Speak to us in words profound,
Across the years, across the centuries,
Across the oceans, and across the seas.
They say, draw near to one another,
Save your race.
You have been paid for in a distant place,
The old ones remind us that slavery's chains
Have paid for our freedom again and again.
The night has been long,
The pit has been deep,

The night has been dark,
And the walls have been steep.

The hells we have lived through and live through still,
Have sharpened our senses and toughened our will.
The night has been long.
This morning I look through your anguish
Right down to your soul.
I know that with each other we can make ourselves whole.
I look through the posture and past your disguise,
And see your love for family in your big brown eyes.

I say, clap hands and let's come together in this meeting ground,
I say, clap hands and let's deal with each other with love,
I say, clap hands and let us get from the low road of indifference,
Clap hands, let us come together and reveal our hearts,
Let us come together and revise our spirits,
Let us come together and cleanse our souls,
Clap hands, let's leave the preening
And stop imposterism our own history.
Clap hands, call the spirits back from the ledge,
Clap hands, let us invite joy into our conversation,
Courtesy into our bedrooms,
Gentleness into our kitchen,
Care into our nursery.

The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain
We are a going-on people who will rise again.
And still we rise.

Introduction to the Poem

"Million Man March" published in 1995. The content of this poem is about the black people who live with the white people as a minority. It is a political poem written for the Million Man March on Washington D.C. 1995. This event is considered one of the most important modern events of African-American civil rights²⁰. Angelou's "Million Man March" reached out to millions, focusing on issues relating to justice and equality that were defined

through the black historical social perspective²¹. The poem depicts the slave days, the effects of slavery on black people and what possibly enslaves the blacks still today. Through this poem, Angelou attempts to demonstrate her anti-racism perspective, and her enthusiasm for fulfilling equality between the Afro-Americans and the white Americans. The poem has been written in hope to end the racial discrimination practiced against the Afro-Americans and for the Afro-Americans to receive the same civil rights as the white people. Angelou urges her race to unite against the policy of racial discrimination and to reject living as outcasts in society. Though the Afro-Americans have lived a history of pain, Angelou shows that she is confident they will rise and make their freedom again if they put their hands together as their ancestors have taught them. She releases boldly her voice "We are a going on people who will rise again, and still we rise".

Analysis of the Symbols in the Poem

In "Million Man March", there are many symbols used to demonstrate Angelou's anti-racism orientation. In the first stanza, the words "night, wound, pit, walls" are symbols of the life of servility which the speaker, as an Afro-American, has experienced in a community ruled by the white Americans. The speaker shows

that suffering and misery have occupied the life of the Afro-Americans for a long time because of the deep pains of slavery. Their world lacks in light. They are treated as if they were invisible. Their rights are ignored. Due to the slavery system, they live as a segregated and alienated people. Their emotions and feelings are not shared with the white Americans. The humanitarian bridge between them is broken because the policy of the racial discrimination practiced systematically against them.

In the second line of the second stanza, Angelou says "I was dragged by my braids just beyond your reach." She uses the pronoun "I" in the poem as a

symbol for all the black females who have suffered a wretched and miserable life with no any protector or supporter. She also uses "you" and "your" in the poem as in the lines "Your hands were tied, your mouth was bound," " You couldn't even call out my name." and "You were helpless and so was I" to refer to all black people who have been powerless and helpless to do something about the white's savage practices against the black females. In addition, in the last line of the second stanza, Angelou says "you have worn a badge of shame". She uses the words "a badge of shame" as a symbol of servility that the black people have lived in their history for a long time.

In the first line of the sixth stanza, Angelou says "the hells we have lived through and live through still". The speaker uses the word "hells" to refer to pains and miserable life that the Afro-Americans have lived and still live because of slavery. The speaker also uses the pronoun "we" to refer to all the Blacks who have shared the pains of slavery. There is a shared sense of misery she wants to convey and this makes the poem a recollection of a whole history of suffering. She focuses

in these lines not only on her personal feelings of shame, misery and pain; rather she reveals these emotions which are related to all the black people in the US who have lived under the shackles of slavery. What is stressed here is the collective sense of traumatic humiliation that she tries to convey to all the readers, blacks and whites

altogether in order to shed light on the specific tragic history of slavery that destroyed the black people for ages.

In the fourth line of the sixth stanza, the speaker says "This morning I look through your anguish/ Right down to your soul". She uses the word "morning" as a symbol of freedom and salvation. Despite the ongoing anguishes they live, the speaker is optimistic that the black people can get their freedom and can make their peaceful life through faith in unity. She looks at them and

sees only anguish that affects their spirits and souls. Hard work in the plantations for long hours under the slavery system led to psychological pains for the black people or slaves at that time. Such psychological influences reflect the black slaves' traumatic life under the system of slavery. She tries to demonstrate that physical labour and hard work is aggravated by the psychological pain the black people feel at that time. She ends the stanza with an optimistic note by saying "I know that with each other we can make ourselves whole. I look through the posture and past your disguise, And see your love for family in your big brown eyes". She emphasizes the black's love for their families as a pacifying dose for their daily suffering and continuous traumatic experience in life due to racism. In this context, she starts the stanza with a description of the 'hells' and the 'night' as indicators of pessimism, hopelessness and gloominess in the black people's miserable daily life, but she concluded the stanza with the optimistic note of the significance of unity between them that comes from loving their families. She tries to say that though they suffer, but the aim of their life is to be united for the sake of their families. What is important is that their suffering feeds the life of their families, it makes these families go on living, even though in dire circumstances. In this context, she gives the readers two different images or symbols of pessimism and optimism to create a realistic portrait of the black people's life at that time.

In the seventh stanza, the speaker uses repeatedly the words "clap hands" as a symbol of unity and collective work. She urges her people of the same race to work together with one heart, one spirit and one soul against the white's inhuman practices for putting an end to slavery and getting their freedom. In the same stanza, the speaker says "the low road of indifference" to refer to the wretched and miserable life in which the Black's rights have been ignored by the majority. The speaker urges the Blacks to get supremacy over their personal

interests and cultivate a reciprocal love among them. By so doing, they can achieve their unity and save themselves from slavery. In addition, she stresses here the idea that unity of the black people represents an option of rescue, hope and a change for the coming future. Their unity signifies an act of protest against the inhuman treatments they get from the whites. Their unity symbolizes their collective call for a change in their status quo. The unity of the present is a shield against a future that might be laden with more suffering and dire circumstances.

In the last two lines of this poem, the speaker says "We are a going on people who will rise again." and "And still we rise". The speaker uses "rise" as a symbol of strength and determination to show that the black people are able to endure their life and they are strong. Although the white people treat them unfairly, they can still get up on their feet and walk away with their heads up high. They still keep rising till they fulfill their desired goal represented in freedom. This stanza is a warning that the future might see the black people's revolution against the slavery system and the inhuman practices of the whites against them. Rising symbolizes revolt and indicates a probable transformation of the blacks' fate from misery, pain and suffering to hope, happiness and dignity and respect.

Conclusion

"Million Man March" divulges how the Afro-Americans live in the US and how Angelou as an Afro American reacts against such a life. After analyzing the symbols manipulated in this poem and getting findings, Angelou's awareness and rejection of the white's racism-based policies can clearly be observed. After tracing the meaning of the symbols in "Million Man March", Angelou shows that the days of servility that the Afro Americans have lived, have been long and dark. But she also shows that she is optimistic their prospect. She sees a light of hope of being free when she says "This morning I

look through your anguish". The study also shows that Angelou is strong, brave and outspoken in challenging the white' racial policies. She works for unity of the black. She says repeatedly "clap hands" as a call for the black to be one hand against all aspects of the racial discrimination practiced against them. She urges her race to derive their strength from their ancestors who have sacrificed themselves for freedom, and to be inspired by their lessons to save their race. In the last two lines of this poem "We are a going on people who will rise again" and "And still we rise", Angelou explains for the world that the black people are persistent, patient and their pains and hardships will not quench their enthusiasm for salvation from servility they live. Angelou confirms that they have determination and will to break the chains of slavery and to keep on rising up and remain strong. There is no doubt these words disclose accurately the full expression of Maya Angelou's anti-racism orientation.

Moreover, Angelou, in this poem, is keen to look for substitutions for the pains, misery and suffering of the black people. Such substitutes can be symbolized by unity of the black people in the face of their dire, miserable and humiliating daily circumstances. Their unity may represent a point of strength that replaces the image of weakness stuck to them for ages. Such a united stance creates a space of collective confronting front to face the destructive powerful inhumanity of the white masters.

In addition, she wants them to feel love and to live in joy and gentleness and not to

stick to states of gloomy suffering. Though their history is laden with pains, humiliation and misery, they have to seek life through loving each other, creating joyful experiences and put aside their past memories of sadness. She tries to make them focus on the present state of life and the future and not the concentration on the past and terrible and humiliating events and memories. In

this context, the use of symbols in this poem show both the black people's state of agony, misery and suffering as part of their painful past that live with them in the present, but Angelou wants the black people to put these feelings aside and start a new life in which optimism may emerge. Their present can be changed if they resort to love, joy, and unity as options of transforming their miserable memories into a present pregnant with optimistic feelings. In this context, the symbols are used in this poem to create a space of optimism more than pessimism for the black people. Angelou wants to reveal through using these symbols that though the black people's past is important in their life, the present is worth living and they must pay more attention to it and to the future.

Notes

¹Howard Jones, *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War*. (University of Nebraska: First Bison Books.1999). p 20-26

²Ibid; p34-42

³Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*.(New York: Oxford University Press.1970). p.76

⁴Howard Jones, *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War*. (University of Nebraska: First Bison Books.1999) .p.83.

⁵Ibid; p146-153

⁶Ian Ousby, *Literature in English* (Cambridge: Press syndicate of the University of Cambridge.1993).P6

⁷Mary Jane Lupton, "Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion". (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.1998) .p 8-24

⁸<http://www.enotes.com/poetry-criticism/angelou-maya>. Accessed on July 23, 2015.

⁹Donna Brown Agins, *Maya Angelou: "Diversity Makes for a Rich Tapestry"*. (United States of America: Library of Congress Cataloging-in- Publication Data.2006). p41-50

¹⁰Robert DiYanni, *Literature Approaches to Fiction, Poetry and Drama*.(New York:McGraw-Hill.2004).p563

¹¹Thomas R.Arps and Greg Johnson, *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense*, Ninth Edition. (the USA,2006).P 713-714

- ¹²M.H.Abrams ,A Glossary of Literary Terms, Eighth Edition.(New Delhi: Cengage Learning.2005).p320
- ¹³Richard Gill, English Literature, Second Edition.(New York:Palgrave.1996)
- ¹⁴Jan Baleka, Vytvarne umeni: vykladovy slovník. (Praha: Academia .1997)
- ¹⁵Richard Gill, Mastering English Literature, Third Edition.(New York:Palgrave. 2006) .p18 2
- ¹⁶David Fontana ,The Secret Language of Symbols and Their Meanings.(London: Duncan Baird.1993)
- ¹⁷M.H.Abrams ,A Glossary of Literary Terms, Eighth Edition.(New Delhi: Cengage Learning.2005)p320
- ¹⁸Ibid; p320
- ¹⁹<http://www.enotes.com/poetry-criticism/angelou-maya>. Accessed on July 23, 2015.
- ²⁰Haki R. Madhubutian and Karenga Maulana, Million Man March/Day of Absence: A Commemorative Theology, Speeches, Commentary, Photography, Poetry, Illustrations & Documents. (United States of America: Third World Press.1996). P152-156
- ²¹Alfred Jarrett, The Impact of Macro Social Systems on Ethnic Minorities in the United States. (United States of America: Praeger Publishers .2000). p 243

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