

STARVING BLACK: A STUDY ON MAYA ANGELOU'S SELECT POEMS**T.S. Raja Jemi Subetha Bai**

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Abstract

Among the African American writers, Maya Angelou has grabbed the attention of masses all over the world. Her poems provide an in depth understanding of the Africans who live in America. Named African American or a Negro or a Nigger, these people face a variety of injustices in America. Hunger is one of the pains inflicted on the African Americans. Angelou expresses the situation of starving Blacks and the rich Whites in the selected poems. The Blacks are very hard working, but usually they are denied the basic necessities of life. The poor people are put in such a situation where the mothers stoop too much for bringing up their own children. But Angelou tells the readers that this situation can be changed if all people work unanimously.

Key words: Change, Children, Equality, Home, Starvation

Maya Angelou is an African American woman writer who through her writings, exposed the realities of the American nation. Her, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* shook the world with a deep feeling towards the African Americans, especially woman, living in the United States of America. Her poems too are autobiographical. Through her poetry, she exposes the themes of race, gender, starvation, survival, transcendence etc.

The poems selected for the present study are: "No No No No", "Alone", "Preacher Don't Send Me" and "Televised". The first poem "No No No No" is a long poem that

castigates the white American society. Though it is professed that there is freedom and liberty, inequality and other crimes are suffused throughout the nation. The poem “Alone” remains a call to all people of America to make the survival of every people possible in America. It stimulates the fact that nobody can bring out the change alone. It has to be a unanimous process. The next poem “Preacher Don’t Send Me” reproaches the preacher for giving promises about paradise. Through this poem Angelou advises the preacher that their utmost need is food while they live. “Televised” is a poem through which the poet expresses her contempt over the white American society that denies the Blacks food.

America is considered as the largest democracy in the world and it has been named as a developed nation. It consists of multi-national people from across the globe. Though people swarm towards America for work, life of Black Americans is not a bed of roses. Where ever they go, they receive ‘No’ as answer for many of the benefits. Such one is ‘food’. As a result, they starve and their children seem to be mal-nutritioned. One can count their ribs. The above poems are written in different angles. First Angelou expounds the magnitude of hunger. Hunger is so high in the American society amidst the Black Americans. They toil a lot for the welfare of the nation, yet they receive nothing. In the poem “No No No No”, Angelou writes:

While crackling babies
In napalm coats
stretch mouths to receive
burning tears
on splitting tongues. (Lines 5-9)

The little ones stretch their mouths just to receive ‘tears’. The tongues of the children are described to be ‘splitting’. They neither have milk nor water to drink and their tongues are dry.

In the same way, Angelou tells that there are priests who enjoy the luxuries of life where as the black children yearn for food. The magnitude of hunger is described in the same poem as:

the red-shoed priest riding
palanquined
in barefoot children country
the plastered saints gazing down
beneficently
on kneeling mothers
picking undigested beans
from yesterday's shit. (Lines 37-44)

This habit of extreme luxury is possible for the priests when the poverty-stricken finds it so hard to find food for each day.

Picking the undigested food from the previous day's shit shows how strange the living condition of the Blacks are in a well-developed nation like United States of America. There would be many organizations all through the nation to help the poor. American resources too spread across the world. But a poor African American mother is put in such a horrible situation in order to feed her children. Jay David quotes Angela David:

The things I learned in the first grade were far more fundamental than school learning. I learned that because one is hungry, one does not have the right to a good meal; or when one is cold, to warm clothing, or when one is sick, to medical care. Many of the children could not even afford to buy a bag of potato chips for lunch. It was agonizing for me to see some of my closest friends waiting outside the lunch room silently watching the other children eating. (211)

Those who could not afford are not given any food either.

The poverty of the children is so terrible that these African Americans try to get to a place, "Where water is not thirsty/ And bread loaf is not stone" (Lines 4-5). Their wish is to find their souls a 'home' where they can reside without any food and water. For them, it is better to die and go to heaven than living on earth without food and water. Even the basic ingredient of one's food is been denied to them. Angelou in her poem "Preacher, Don't Send Me", writes, "I stopped all milk/ at four years old" (Lines 20-21). In the previous poem, she

thinks of heaven but the latter poem shows her hatred towards that belief because food is something necessary when people are living.

Secondly, Angelou expresses how hunger has affected the lives of the Black American people and how they are different from the White Americans. Starvation is not equal to the present day intermediate fasting or weight loss techniques. The Black Americans are denied what is necessary for them. The situation is described as follows in the poem “Televised”:

the sad-eyed faces of
bony children,
distended bellies making
mock at their starvation. (Lines 7-11)

It is as if the children’s belly itself mocks at their starvation and the false hope given by the preachers, “the razored insults/ which mercury-slide over tongue/ will be forgotten” (Lines 66-68) as in “No No No No”.

Further Angelou tells that the available food is stinking. They suffer from the mal-nutrition and their bellies always rumble and bloat. In the poem “Televised”, she writes: “The lamp-chop flesh/ reeks and cannot be/ eaten...” (Lines 14-16) whereas the White Americans enjoy all farm fresh and nutritious food. A White narrator of the poem “Televised” says “...Even the /green peas roll on my plate/unmolested...” (Lines 16-18). The hardworking people who work in the plantations and farmlands don’t get what they produce.

The richest of the White American society does have a lot to eat, and have too much of money which they do not know how to spend. In the poem “Alone”, Angelou accuses:

There are some millionaires
with money they can’t use
...
They’ve got expensive doctors
To cure their hearts of stone. (Lines 14-19)

The poorest of the nation are mocked at by the wealthier and racist White Americans. Finally, Angelou gives a call to the whole people of America in the poem “Alone” because “The race of man is suffering” (31). She feels that every citizen should take it as one’s own responsibility in eradicating poverty from the nation. If someone has a heart to feel and eyes that are never blinded by colour, then an individual can bring about change in the society. According to Angelou, only if all people stand united for this purpose, one can see a change in the nation because nobody can bring change all by oneself. Angelou affirms:

And I don’t believe I’m wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone. (Lines7-10)

She repeats the above lines six times in the poem stressing its importance.

Though America can claim that it is a developed nation, unless and until, when each little kid has milk to drink and every child and other grownups have prosper nutritious food and healthcare, it cannot be a developed one. Equality must thrive irrespective of money and colour. Then America will be a great nation that mothers different types of people.

References

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