



Disclosing of Voices: Analysis of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" and V.I.S. Jayapalan's "The Song of the Defeated"

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore the plight of the marginal people through the poems "Still I Rise" written by Maya Angelou and "The Song of the Defeated" written by V.I.S. Jayapalan. It brings out the struggles faced by the marginalized to gain a sense of identity. The identity crisis of the Sri Lankan Tamils and the African Americans is analysed through the poems. The sense of alienation, lack of opportunities, respect and equal treatment is brought out. It also implores the mindset of the people and their rebellious nature to stand up against the injustice, focusing on the defiant and furious tone used by the poets to project their strong sense of objection. It specifically scrutinizes the crucial role of the tone used in the poem, which acts as a contrast to many other marginal writings. It also highlights the difference in location, and ethnic groups based on which the poems are sketched. The themes of oppression, quest for change, rebellious nature brings a sense of unity between the poems which is clearly presented. The crucial and revolutionary role of literature in revolting against the oppression is also sketched. The paper particularly discusses the superior mindset and the cruel attitude of the people towards the other communities that is pushed to the periphery. It showcases that the themes of oppression and superiority are not just the problem of a single community but a global problem. The poems are analysed with reference to the timeframe in which they are written.

Keywords: Race, Oppression, Hope, Struggle, Literature, Marginalised, Periphery

Introduction

Literature is the mirror of contemporary society. It acts as a record of history with varied emotions and aesthetics. It is used to express the inner emotions and desires of a human. The word 'marginalized' is derived from the Latin word 'margo' which means border. The term was used to refer to the people who lack power or influence in the society. They are often treated as outsiders in the society in which they live. The marginalized people have used literature as a powerful weapon to express their indescribable sensation. They transform their writing into a revolution by transferring their thoughts into the minds of the readers. The marginal writers do not just write their personal struggles but bring out the

problems faced by the entire community they represent, which acts as a microcosm of the entire society. De Bonald has said that, “Literature is an expression of the society”

The paper brings out the complex emotions and feelings of the marginalized people through the poems, “The Song of the Defeated” by V.I.S. Jayapalan and “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou.

The Song of the Defeated

The poem “The Song of the Defeated” is written by V.I.S. Jayapalan, a Sri Lankan-Norwegian writer. He vividly describes the pains and torments undergone by the Tamils who were treated as marginal people in Sri Lanka. Though they have made their settlements years back they were not accepted as a part of the nation. The inhumane treatment, injustice made to them is picturized by the author through his words. The Tamil people in Sri Lanka were treated as marginalized people because they were considered a minority. The Sri Lankan civil war was the outburst of the tensions that prevailed between the Sri Lankan government and the Sri Lankan Tamils, in which a lot of Tamil people were brutally killed and humiliated.

Still I Rise

The poem “Still I Rise” is written by Maya Angelou. She is an African American writer and she has brought in the condition of the Africans settled in America. In spite of America being a settler colony, the blacks were considered as subordinate based on their skin color. Angelou intrusively writes about the atrocities faced by them with a note of hope and pride. It clearly represents the pains of the Black women and their courage to withstand. It had a strong association towards the civil rights movement and the Black feminist movement.

Both the poems have the themes of oppression, identity crisis and a sense of hope and revival. Though both poets has written about two entirely different parts of the world, the treatment they have received is almost the same. From this we could understand the mindset of the oppressors and their sense of superiority towards the other, oppressed humans. Eventually it disturbs the normal life of the people and makes them marginalized.

The poems have been written almost in the same time period, which is around 1970's which again authenticates that these themes could not be confined to a particular place, ethnic group or community. The tone used by both the poets is again notable. It highlights the spirit of the marginalized people. They have used a bold tone and they do not mourn for their past.

“Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gift that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.”

They did not try to conceal their failures and slavery, instead they took it as a worthy reason to change their living conditions. Maya Angelou in her poem has used the phrase “Still I Rise” as a refrain, which emphasizes her spirit to attain victory amidst the harsh realities. She uses a mocking style to show her fearlessness. Likewise, Jayapalan has come up with a paradoxical title, “The Song of the Defeated” which questions the conventional concepts. Songs are usually a part of victory but Jayapalan says that though the Sri Lankan Tamils have been defeated in physical means, their inner spirit still burns with rage and that rage is worthy of praise or a song. Both the poets do not express shame for their situation but has understood the means to overcome it through their powerful writings. Moreover they are not willing to fake their identity, which has made them failures. Instead they are proud of their identity. It is evident from Angelou’s lines from the poem,

“I’m the black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and tear
I Rise”

In both the poems the poets have mentioned about their ancestors which again shows their sense of pride. They honour the efforts of their ancestors, who have become martyrs for their race and they also thank them for the unique knowledge that they have passed to the younger generation. They glorify their tradition by bringing in their cultural beliefs and practices which shows their strict adherence to their native culture and tradition. It also reveals their mindset that they are glad about their ancestry amidst the undesirable treatment they have received. Jayapalan has brought in the concept of kula dheivangal who are not just Gods but fierce warriors who have fought to save their people.

“They will discover Karuppusamy, Kathavaranyas,
Madurai veerans like Deepan
Who became a shooting star at Mullivaikal.”

Similarly Angelou has revealed the signs of their traditional wealth. She describes that they were wealthy through the words diamonds, goldmines and oil wells. This shows their sense of pride and attachment to their identity though they were not accepted as a part of the place where they live.

The poets have come to a point that they can be treated in such cruel ways because of the unquestioned authority of their oppressors. But they would do it as a form of

encouragement. According to Jayapalan, their inefficiency to attack their rivals back is also a form of an antidote for their pains and struggles. The poets do not expect an equal treatment from the people who ill-treat them. Jayapalan does not plead them to treat them as equals instead he narrates the atrocities done to them, and instills hope through his words that they would gain their rights.

“We are a charred forest
But our song continues
From the roots that remain
Our song will continue
As a dirge for the dead”

Both the poets have come up with an impression that their rivals are afraid. They have not just recorded the mindset of the marginalized people but also have tried to come up with the mindset of the people who suppress them. According to Jayapalan, they celebrate the defeat of the Sri Lankan Tamils but still they grow weak because within their hearts they know that what they have done is a pure act of injustice.

They do not want the world to just sympathize for them but they attempt to show their caliber. They try to unveil their potential to gain a sense of identity amidst the identity crisis they face. Jayapalan records that they would turn self-criticism as a remedy to make a better attempt and to understand the reason for their failure.

In both the poems, the poets have associated them or their life to the natural elements which reflects their proximity with the traditional life. They find solace through nature. Jayapalan symbolizes them as charred forests whereas Angelou symbolizes them as moons and stars because they are never ending. Though they are not visible in the daytime it does not mean that they are gone forever and it states they would not succumb even if they are exposed to adverse situations. Though they are suppressed and ill-treated they revive as the sprouting shoots in a burnt forest. They both associate their spirit of hope to nature and its infinite existence just like that of nature.

The Song of the Defeated

The main purpose of the song is not to evoke a sense of pity among the readers. The poets have used their powerful verse with a strong diction as a form of revenge which portrays their undefeatable spirit to attain equality and gain a sense of identity. As they could not attack them directly, Literature helps them to create a way to express their internal emotions. In “The Song of the Defeated” Jayapalan comes out with the lines,

“If I cannot curse the legs that kick you,

What is the use of this song?”

Though Jayapalan has brought out the tortures they have undergone, he completely does not want to be a sympathetic figure. He makes a point that the failures they face instigate the burning zeal inside them. The same could be seen through the writing of Angelou, though she expresses their struggles, she did want the readers to perceive them as weak people.

More importantly both the Tamil community in Sri Lanka and the African American community in America have settled many centuries ago but they are not accepted as a part of the country which again questions the mindset of the people. The contributions of these marginalized people have been a major thing in the advancement of these nations but they have been almost concealed and have not been recognized.

Life of Marginalized

Marginalized people lead tough lives and struggle hard for their existence but the lives of women from such oppressed communities are even tougher. Women are the first hand victim of any violent environment. Being a marginalized person in a particular place is torturous but specifically being a woman adds a layer of pain to it. This has been enclosed by both the poets. They have vividly brought out the mental and physical trauma that a woman faces in such a situation. V.I.S. Jayapalan has started his poem in a hopeful tone but suddenly uses digression when he writes about women and their struggles. He says that he is filled with fear because they rape the Sri Lankan Tamil women brutally and proceed to live without any guilt. The emotions of those women are purposefully tested. They would be forced to see the men of their family being shot.

“This is the time of gods of a news lineage.

The anger of our raped women
will be reborn as fiery goddesses”

Similarly, Angelou also comes up with the problems faced by African American women. They were also brutally assaulted by their White masters, who are not blamed as they bear a place in the society as an unquestioned authority. Though the people of the marginalized community are treated as inferior, those women are still used as sexual objects by the men. From this we could understand that the writings of both V.I.S. Jayapalan and Maya Angelou are separated by the boundaries, ethnicity and race. Still they hold the same emotions and they also experience the identity crisis. They lack a sense of belonging in their own places where they were born and raised.

Conclusion

This study could be viewed through the lens of Archetypal theory. There is a vast difference in the cultural background of the people but the ideology of race, superiority, oppression and marginalization are found as common themes. This could be seen through the writings of Angelou and Jayapalan. Besides their differences in the themes there is a remarkable association in their writings. This could be associated with the concept of collective unconsciousness through which a particular majority group gains a form of superiority over the minority group in the name of class, community and race.

References

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