

A feminist study of maya angelou's poem, "men"



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“ On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in her strength, not to escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself but to assert herself-on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger.” Simone de Beauvoir

Maya Angelou's poem, “ Men” is an exceptional example of power V/S powerlessness and it skilfully takes us into the mindset of a woman who has doubtlessly been a victim of the male dominating society. The poem communicates to us very conveniently, the intricate complication of our vulnerable need for men as well as the stark divergence in our characters. The subject matter and her dealing with it confirm the height of the maturity of the poet and her remarkable ability to portray her body's thoughts as well as her mind's working. She has tried to reveal the unfeeling, bitter and ruthless nature of men through a hidden contract which portrays the delicacy, innocence and patience of women. The “ non-significant other” of the first stanza seems to be fully exposed to the bitterness of life by the end of the poem.

Keeping in mind Lacan's concept that the “ entry into the Symbolic Order, the structure of language, is different for boys and girls” and also focusing on the fact that the Post structuralist feminist theory throws light on “ the category or position ‘ woman’ as part of a binary opposition, ‘ man/woman’, in which ‘ man’ is the favoured term”, we can take a look at the poem and form a very vivid idea about it. We also have to remember that the goal of the feminists is to deconstruct this ‘ man/woman’ binary, and all the other binaries that strengthen and emphasize it, such as ‘ masculine/feminine, good/evil, light/dark, positive/negative, culture/nature’ etc. The ‘

phallogocentric culture' in which we dwell values the left-side terms more while considering the right-side terms as ' other' or undesirable.

The experiences of women and their portrayal of them differ enormously from those of men's. The feminists believed that it was important to develop a uniquely female consciousness based on the experience of women rather than stressing upon the conventional " male theories of reading, writing and critiquing." Known as " gynocriticism", (a term coined by the feminist scholar Elaine Showalter), this " female model of literary analysis" provides four directions for the evaluation of a certain text which we would be applying to the poem.

The first direction leads us to the " images of the female body" in the poem. According to Bresslor, female writers use " anatomical imagery" to present their complex themes. For example, breasts have always been a subject of some controversy in feminism, being our ' foremost' sexual charm, so to speak. It's a dilemma for feminism: on the one hand, breasts are something that declares us to be women; but on the other hand, men like breasts so therefore they are dirty and wicked. Image of " breasts" here suggests the innocence and vulnerability of young girls to the probable and expected harms of the society (obviously, through the exploitation by the dominating sex). We do find an inkling here of some sort of conceited satisfaction of the possession of the breasts when Maya is comparing the " high" shoulders of men with " the breasts of a young girl."

The Second direction, which is indeed very interesting for the examination of this poem, leads us to the kind of " language" being used by Maya. The

selection of words for men and woman differ strongly and we can clearly observe that harsh and arrogant vocabulary is used for men while women are dealt with in a very fragile and pious way. Although we are told that it is the woman spying over men from “ behind the curtains”, watching them as they walk up and down the street, but we do get vibes that the real “ spy” is the man who would ultimately grab hold of the “ defenceless” woman, and finally “ shatter” her apart. The words like “ young men sharp as mustard” with shoulders “ high” suggest the power of the male, highlighting and supporting the western culture’s assumption that “ males are superior to females and therefore are better thinkers, more rational, more serious and more reflective than women.” The fragility of the tender sex is further enhanced by the dramatic illustration of the handling of women by men. The similes and comparisons as well as the vocabulary used clearly confirm the sex of the poet to be female. We can trace a number of images that refer to the kitchen and kitchen-ware. Phrases like “ sharp as mustard”, “ starving for them”, “ last raw egg” and “ head of a kitchen match” are obvious examples of vocabulary used by women. It is not that such vocabulary cannot be used by men, but the way it is used unconsciously here in this poem is undoubtedly an effort of a woman.

The third and the most significant direction suggested by gynocriticism is to evaluate the “ female psyche” and its connection to the writing process. We need to observe some of the concepts inculcated in the minds of women about the men to trace and evaluate the hidden female psyche behind this poem. Men are feared by women everywhere. They are strong, powerful and are laden with an ability to exploit women anytime. They treat women in a

ruthless manner, are deceitful and vile towards them and lack loyalty in relations. The poem refers to all these concepts in a captivating way.

It seems quite obvious that she had some traumatic and unforgettable experience with men or a man. The only power she seems to possess over men is the power of standing behind the "curtain" which, obviously, isn't much at all. Curtain, here, could be symbolic of various things including virginity, distance, oblivion and innocence. The need of a man in a woman's life is obvious and the poet is aware of it as she knows she is "starving" for him, but the ultimate fear keeps her behind the "curtain" as she has some vague knowledge of the deceitful nature of man as well. She knows that as long as she is behind the curtain, she is comparatively safe from the tyrannical handling of the man. The more distant she is from the "centre" man, she has more chances to be "slippery", "fluid", "less fixed" and "playful." Another image that "Men are always going somewhere" refers to the universal characteristic of males that they are never satisfied with one thing. No matter what they possess, they are always on the hunt for more. After they fully utilize (read exploit) the body of these "mindless entities", they conveniently move ahead, leaving the "shattered" existences behind with the "slammed shut" bodies devoid of any keys.

Culture and society's influence on the woman's understanding of herself and her surroundings is the fourth direction we have to look at according to the gynocriticism. The mores and traditions of the society are so overwhelming specifically for the women that they have to mold their lives according to the customs set by the male rulers. In this poem, we see that the poet has traced the gradual development of the woman's mind in an excellent way.

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The Curtain, seen through the eyes of culture, could also refer to the naivety and simplicity of the young girl of the poem. The drawing of the “ window” full upon the “ mind” could possibly hint to the revelation on the mind of the woman about the true reality of the man and society at large. After experiencing her worst experience, the young girl now is fully exposed to the bitter reality of life. By the end of the poem, she tries to assure the audience that, now that she is aware of the truth and the harshness of life, she would avoid any encounter with these men. “ But this time”, she says, “ I will simply stand and watch.” But this is not so, as we are given a hint of the vulnerability of the woman through the last word. She isn't sure she would be able to keep herself away from men. The last “ May be” clearly states that neither is she sure of being safe from the mistreatment of the men in future nor can she strictly keep herself behind the curtain anymore.