

ROLE OF LITERATURE IN THE UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN. CRITICAL STUDY OF THE POEM ‘A PHENOMENAL WOMAN’ BY MAYA ANGELOU

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Abstract

Art has a relation to social reality. Ideas embodied in literary work transform the thinking of individuals. Literature has played a powerful role in the upliftment of women. Right from Jane Austen, George Eliot, Toni Morrison to NayantaraSehgal, Anita Desai etc. women from all centuries and nationalities have explored the issue and portrayal of women in the male dominated society. Their works have empowered women. It may be observed here that Literature doesn't just empower women socially but it also uplifts them spiritually. It empowers one with an inner confidence. Maya Angelou's works are a prime example of this. Her Poem Phenomenal Woman equips women with things necessary for strengthening them inwardly. It is a celebration of womanhood. This article explores the key ideas expressed in the poem and discusses how they uplift woman emotionally, spiritually and is a strength -builder.

Key Words: Inner Mystery, Phenomenal, Real Beauty, upliftment of women

Introduction:

Art has a relation to social reality. Ideas embodied in literary work transform the thinking of individuals. Literature is a powerful expression of urges, passion, desires of human minds. These urges and passions depicted in the piece of writing penetrate the inner recesses of the reader during the act of reading. Literature has played a powerful role in the upliftment of women. Right from Jane Austen, George Eliot, Toni Morrison to NayantaraSehgal, Anita Desai etc.

Literature has witnessed the roles of women evolving through ages, but until recent times, most of the published writers were men and the portrayal of women in literature was without doubt biased. A lot of it has to be blamed on the fact that in the ancient world, literacy was strictly limited, and the majority of those who could write were male. However, the contribution of women to oral folklore cannot be taken for granted – in folk songs, stories, poetry and literature in general. Here's a look at how women were portrayed in literature through eras.

During the Victorian era, there was an unending debate over the roles of women. While the era was dominated by writers who treated women as angelic figures- innocent, physically weaker and nothing less than household commodities; Edwardian poetry spoke of women's rights gathering much attention, feminism and females getting out of their homes during the war times.

Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' and Lord Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott' from the Victorian era centred around women involved a quest to attain some higher knowledge, which is limited to men and how in their attempt, they lose their ability to get back to the womanhood they were proud of. The Probationer, by AM Irvine is the best example of state of women in the post-Victorian era. Signalling the beginnings of Modernism, the novel also showcases characteristics of the modern women's rights by portraying an independent and gifted female protagonist's professional and personal coming-of-age.

According to author Anita Nair, "Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Good women as in ones who accepted societal norms were rewarded with happily ever after. Even feisty heroines eventually go onto find content and life's purpose in a good man's arms, be it Elizabeth Bennett (Pride and Prejudice) or Jane Eyre (Jane Eyre). Alternatively, they are left to rue their lot with a contrived courage as with Scarlett O'Hara (Gone with the Wind) or have to take their lives like Anna Karenina or Karuthamma (Chemmeen) or Emma Bovary (Madame Bovary)."

Author Jaishree Mishra feels if literature is doing its job as a mirror to society then, obviously, the depiction of women in books has changed along with society, from Jane Austen's seemingly demure heroines onto Helen Fielding's openly scatty, mouthy Bridget Jones, a modern-day reworking of 'Pride & Prejudice'.

Speaking of depiction of women in Indian poetry, it was freedom-fighter, educationist and activist Mahadevi Varma, who became the torchbearer of Hindi poetry on women issues. She also wrote on issues of women's emancipation and female sexuality - one that pretty much existed outside marriage. The great poetess took drew inspiration for her subjects from traditional Hindu literature, which talked about liberating images.

Jai Shankar Prasad, who was famous for his strong portrayals of women became popular for famously glorifying women. A popular verse from one of his most widely read poems, 'Kamayani' reads - "Nari! tumkewalshradha ho, Vishwas-rajat-nag-pal-talmein, Piyushstrotsibahakaro, Jeevankisundarsamtalmein. (Oh woman! You are honour personified, Under the silver mountain of faith, Flow you, like a river of ambrosia, On this beautiful earth)".

Poetess Amrita Pritam proved to be one of the leading voices in Indian regional poetry in the 20th century. Her Punjabi verses, which spoke of the aftermath of the India-Pakistan partition in the region of Punjab and the women oppressed in due course achieved a cult status amongst poetry lovers and late Kamala Das paved way for a heart-rending style of feminine confessional poetry, in which a common theme was the exploration of the man-woman relationship. This style was subsequently taken up by other women poets such as Gauri Deshpande and Chitra Narendran.

Long ago, famous Hindi writer, Mridula Garg had mentioned in her bestselling novel 'Chittacobra', "When we reach the zenith of civilisation all our crimes will be committed in unison with mutual consent to the sound of popular approbation," and the legendary writer thinks that's true of the depiction of women in literature today. "There is greater concern with proving oneself on the right side of Feminist discourse than a compassionate account of both man and women, who dare to dissent from the opinion of the many. Superficially there is franker depiction of both sexuality and general independence of women. But female sexuality has got reduced to freedom of the body, including the outspoken if inconsequential depiction of body functions such as menstruation, sexual desires and sexual assault. The real independence which stems from taking decisions without deference to the canons of discourses, religious, social, patriarchal or feminist is missing," says Garg.

"In the works of Mirabai, and later Krishna Sobti, Amrita Pritam and myself, there was no guilt felt by women not conforming to moral strictures but men were treated with as much empathy as women. There is much more confrontation now and also open and loud avowal of Feminism. But there are positive aspects of that. Savita Singh, who delights in calling herself a Feminist poet says in one of her poems, "Who can know the body as a woman does." and goes on to add "It is only she who can free the body from the body..." The second sentence is the positive part," concludes Garg.

More recently, contemporary popular fiction Indian writers like ChetanBhagat and Anita Nair have showcased the new woman in their books. While Chetan portrays his women characters as harbingers of social change and equality, an aspect which is evident in his book 'One Night @ the Call Centre', where men and women are treated equally and work in night shifts. Nair's characters have their own pain and sorrow but they overcome their entire struggle, a fact you'll notice especially in her bestseller, Ladies Coupe.

Nair feels nothing has changed in the terms of mentality, "That a woman could live a fulfilled life on her own terms was a concept writers seemed unable to conceive or unwilling to explore. Sadly, very little has changed. Women in fiction may have shrugged some of the strait jacketed representations but anytime a woman character chooses to live life on her terms, readers tend to get agitated. In my own fiction, I have had my characters Akhila (Ladies Coupe), Radha (Mistress) or Lena (Alphabet Soup for Lovers) being ticked off for choosing to swerve off the conventional path."

Mishra is of the opinion that women writers still feel pressurized in the world of literature. "I find it curious that some of the constant literary bestsellers are stories with women protagonists (all the Bronte & Austen books and even some written by men, like Flaubert's 'Madame Bovary') while, in today's publishing climate, editors balk terribly at that, even advising their writers to use male pseudonyms (eg J K Rowling) as readers are apparently put off by women writers and woman-centric stories. Whoever came up with that should be shot," adds Mishra.

Also, unignorable has been ShobhaaDe's unabashed description of the womenfolk in her novels. De's women range from traditional, subjugated and marginalized to the extremely modern and liberated women. De's novels take a leaf the urban life and represent realistically an intimate side of urban woman's life, also revealing her plight in the present day society. Also, interesting is the way she highlights a woman's role in the oppression and suffering of fellow women, an aspect showcased in De's novel 'Starry Nights'. The women in De's novels revive their lost fortunes, look glamorous, act different, break the norms, and are sexually liberated and free thinkers.

Women from all centuries and nationalities have explored the issue and portrayal of women in the male dominated society. Their works have empowered women. It may be observed here that Literature doesn't just empower socially but it also uplifts spiritually. It empowers one with an inner confidence.

Maya Angelou's works are a prime example of this. In her long and extensive career Maya Angelou, an American Poet, Civil Right Activist, published several poems along with autobiographies, essays and other works.

Maya Angelou, born April 4, 1928 as Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis, was raised in segregated rural Arkansas. She was a poet, historian, author, actress, playwright, civil-rights activist, producer and director. She lectured throughout the US and abroad and was Reynolds professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina since 1981. She published ten bestselling books and numerous magazine articles earning her Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award nominations. At the request of President Clinton, she wrote and delivered a poem at his 1993 presidential inauguration.

Her poems dwell upon various issues including women. Her poems celebrate womanhood. Her poem Phenomenal Woman appears in Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women, a book of poems published in 1995. The poem, a free verse narrative, is addressed in first person and attacks the conventional notions of beauty in a woman. It reinforces the fact that Beauty is skin deep. "Phenomenal Woman" challenges restrictive notions of feminine beauty. The speaker rejects narrow societal beauty standards, and insists instead that real beauty comes from a place of self-confidence and self-acceptance. The speaker opens the poem by referencing the "secret" to her appeal.

Phenomenal Woman

BY MAYA ANGELOU

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies.
I say,
It's in the reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.
I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.
I say,
It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.
Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them,
They say they still can't see.
I say,
It's in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.
Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing,
It ought to make you proud.

I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
the palm of my hand,
The need for my care.
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

About the Poem:

Angelou's 'Phenomenal Woman' taps on the themes of womanhood, identity, pride, self-love, and self-acceptance. The main theme, being womanhood, is celebrated throughout the poem. The line, "I'm a woman" propagates her self-confidence in being a woman. She not only celebrates her bodily beauty but also her inner glow.

The speaker refers to an elusive "secret" about herself that conventionally attractive women struggle to understand. She explains that she doesn't look like the models glorified by the fashion industry, and that when she starts to reveal her secret these other women don't believe her. The speaker claims that her beauty is manifested in her wide hips, her confident gait, and her smile. She's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

Whenever the speaker calmly walks into a room, every single man present desperately competes for her attention. These men are drawn to the speaker, buzzing around her like honey bees. This is because her passion for life manifests in her physical appearance—in her flashing eyes, her vibrant smile, the way her waist sways as she walks, and the happy lightness in her step. She again declares that she's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

Men have also asked themselves what it is about the speaker that makes her so attractive. But no matter how hard they try to pin down the speaker's mysterious appeal, they can't come close. Even when she tries to reveal her secret to these men, they just don't get it. The speaker says that her beauty exists in the way she carries herself—in her confident posture; her bright, sunny smile; the shape of her breasts; and her elegant style. She's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

This, the speaker says, is why she insists on moving throughout the world confidently and boldly. She doesn't have to overcompensate in any way or prove herself to anyone. In fact, when other women see the speaker, they should be inspired to be more confident themselves. The speaker's appeal exists in the way she struts in heels, in the way her hair falls, in the way she holds out her hands, in the way others want her to care for them. She's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

In the opening lines the poet says that beautiful women wonder where her beauty secret lies as she does not possess the beautiful face. Her physique is also not like a model. The women ask her what makes her attractive and beautiful. The poet cheerfully admits that her beauty is within her reach. She is proud of her arms, her gait and her smile. But they disbelieve it. Later, in the poem, the poet admits that whenever she walks into a room, men stand or fall down on their knees.

The speaker opens with a reference to the "secret" of her own beauty, claiming that "pretty women" want to understand how the speaker can be so alluring without being considered conventionally attractive. The speaker explains that she may not meet social definitions of "cute" and that she doesn't fit the expected mold of what an attractive woman is supposed to look like.

She specifically calls out the fashion industry, making note of the fact that she doesn't have the tall, skinny build of a model. On a formal level, note how this line is the longest in the poem—a visual refutation of the idea that the speaker must shrink herself down to fit the fashion world's ideal of feminine beauty.

Notably, the speaker claims that when she explains her secret to these women, they believe she is "telling lies." This suggests that rigid definitions of beauty are so ingrained in women that they struggle to believe any alternative perspective, even when it's coming from another woman. By touching on women's visceral rejection of the truth, the speaker subtly reveals the profound psychological impact that cultural conditioning has on body image and self-perception.

These "pretty women" have internalized the attitudes of a society that glorifies the supermodel physique as the ideal to such an extent that they are blinded to the truth. In this sense, the speaker attempts to refute and deconstruct the harmful models of beauty that warp women's understanding of the world and themselves.

They swarm around her like a hive of honey bees. Men vie for her attention. She says it is because

It's in the fire in my eyes, And the flash of my teeth, The swing in my waist, And the joy in my feet.

Men themselves have wondered the reason behind her allure she carries. They fail to understand the secret of her inner mystery even when she shows them. She says it is in

It's in the arch of my back, The sun of my smile, The ride of my breasts, The grace of my style.

In the last stanza she tells the readers why her head is not bowed. She walks confidently with her head held high. She doesn't shout or jump about or talk loudly to be seen or heard. She tells the women that they ought to be proud of her when they see her passing by. Her beauty is in the

It's in the click of my heels, The bend of my hair, The palm of my hand, The need of my care.

Key Ideas Expressed in the Poem:

1. Traditional Concept of Beauty Vs Real Beauty: The poem attacks the traditional notion of beauty. In the first stanza the poet says that she is not cute and not built to suit a fashion model's size. Her body is not built to wear fashion designer's clothes. She does not possess beautiful facial features; but still people find her beautiful and women who are pretty themselves wonder where the secret of her beauty lies. When the poet tells them it is in the reach of her arms, in the stride of her steps and curl of her lips; they do not believe her. This shows that the poet looks beautiful even with her non-conventional looks. She does not require things that society deems a woman ought to possess to make her beautiful.

2. Inner Mystery: The men swarm around her and wonder where her beauty lies. She tries to show them but they fail to perceive it. They cannot see her inner mystery. They cannot touch it. It is the internal spirit of a woman and in a woman that the world cannot comprehend. This internal spirit is a kind of mystery. Peace, tranquillity and happiness spring from this inner side of a woman which illuminates her external being.

3) Beauty of and in Being a Woman: The Beauty of Womanhood : The poet lists out all her attributes which make her beautiful and after listing out in each stanza she ends with the following lines:

Cause I'm a woman Phenomenally.

Phenomenal Woman, That's me.

The poet has used this literary device of Epiphora to repeat the words and phrases at the end of each stanza. This phrase is repeated to emphasize that the secret of her beauty lies in her womanhood. Being a woman in itself is a beauty bestowed from the high heavens. She calls herself a woman who is phenomenally phenomenal. A woman is artistically sculpted, divinely created, beautifully crafted, passionately moulded and is then breathed life by the Divine Maker. And such a masterpiece requires no other extraneous elements to accentuate her beauty.

Conclusion

Each woman must realize her inner strength and potential. They need not rely on material things for beauty. This poem teaches us what real beauty is. The real beauty is in the essence of womanhood. It lies in being and realizing womanhood.

“Now you understand Just why my head’s not bowed. I don’t shout or jump about or have to talk real loud”. This realization will enable women to walk with their head held high. It will enable to live women with dignity, honor and self-esteem. Thus, literature contains such strengthening thoughts and values.

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