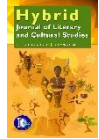




Intersections of voice and agency as strategies for power and resistance in the poetry of Maya Angelou



Review article



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Abstract

This article sought to analyse intersections of voice and agency in the poetry of Maya Angelou. It explores how various discourses of marginalization such as those of gender, race and class inform knowledge production by marginalized persons as portrayed in Angelou's poetry. The article demonstrates how the marginalized appropriate voice to resist hegemony. This is validated through voice reclamation and performative subjectivity to articulate issues of the marginalized as one way of resisting hegemonic discourses that have governed their parameters for agency and identity. The data for analysis in this article is obtained from a critical reading and sampling of poems in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. Anchored on the intersectionality theory, the article examines Angelou's representation of the Spivakian concept of voice as appropriated by the marginalized and how in its intersection with agency, is used as a rhetoric of resistance in her poetry.

Keywords: agency, empowerment, intersection, resistance, voice



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Public Interest Statement

This study investigates the interplay between voice, agency and empowerment in the poetry of Maya Angelou. The study demonstrated how these concepts are intertwined through that though certain person marginalized by intersecting discourses such as those of social class, race and sexism, the appropriation of voice and agency enables them to engage in knowledge production and resist marginalization.

1.1 Contextualizing Voice and Agency

Individuals and groups marginalized by certain discourses are silenced and effectively subordinated by the dominant world-view of those in power. They therefore, lack a meaningful position from which to speak out their issues and hence, have no voice (Spivak, 1988). Spivak argues that these silenced persons, whom she refers to as *subalterns* are always categorised by dominant discourses as the “other” based on differences of race, class or gender, have no representation, and must therefore engage in self representation and speak for themselves. Articulating issues that affect them enables them to engage in self-definition, effectively demarcating themselves as different and separate from the dominant group and therefore, developing their own voice for self-representation. Further, as argued by Ann Marie Gooetz and Rob Jenkins, for the marginalized persons’ voice to effectively represent their plight and resist hegemony, it must go beyond the capacity of speaking and being heard to taking up agency. Agency therefore, involves purposive action and enables individuals to act independently of the constraining power of such discourse, and is together with voice, employed to effectively resist marginalization.

Patricia Collins views knowledge production by marginalized as a key element in the empowerment of such persons, arguing that knowledge production facilitates the appropriation of agency and voice. She equates the production of oppositional knowledge and self-definition to attaining voice and taking up agency, arguing that by re writing histories and articulating their issues, marginalized persons agentially engage in the resistance of dominant discourses and re configuration of subjectivity. Hence, as will be demonstrated in this paper, in Angelou’s poetry, knowledge production becomes a key element in the marginalized persons’ attainment of agency and voice so that, as opined by Spivak, if the subaltern speaks, they are empowered, take up agency and no longer remain subaltern, as subalternity results from lack of voice and agency.

1.2 Methodology

This article adopted a qualitative approach and was conducted through textual analysis. Its objective was to examine how the intersection of voice and agency is manifested in the poetry of Maya Angelou and analyse how it is employed as a strategy of empowerment and resistance in the poetry. The source of the poems was the anthology *The Complete Collected Poetry of Maya Angelou* and the choice of poems for analysis was done through purposive sampling, based on thematic concerns and stylistic features employed by the Maya Angelou to realize meaning. The selection of the poems was also informed by the researchers' prior knowledge on poetry and vigorous reading previously undertaken on the area under study. Four poems were selected for this study; *Artful Pose*, *Awakening in New York*, *Our Grandmother* and *Caged Bird*. In its reading and analysis of these poems, the study relied on Spivak's interpretation of voice as a representational and empowerment strategy for the marginalized and was guided by the intersectionality theory. Primary data and secondary data for this study was collected and analysed in line with the objectives of the study and the guiding theoretical framework.

1.3 Findings

The Spivakian notion of the subaltern speaking directly for themselves is reflected in Maya Angelou's poetry in two ways. One is through Maya's own conceptualization of her poetry as a rhetoric of resistance. Another way is through intersections of voice and agency in knowledge production as a form of articulatory power through which the marginalized engage in self representation and negotiation of identity. From the social context of her poetry, it is evident that Maya Angelou's poetry is written within an interface of intersecting factors of marginalization such as race, gender and class. Hence, Maya portrays her poems as a voice that speaks on the realities of marginalization. She believes that the poetic voice should be representative of the issues that people face every day and should speak up against injustice. Thus, In *Artful Pose* (p. 90), she resists what she considers vain poetry that only writes; "of falling leaves, melting/ snows, of birds/ in their delights" (p. 90). She feels that poetry should dedicate itself to the voicing of realities such as issues of falsity in the society (false lovers) and human relations permeated by unequal power relations. To this effect, her poetry (pen) appropriates voice to resist the pretentious 'silence' of such poetry, as she urgently needs to use her voice to highlight the plight of those swindled by false love and those affected by the evils of hatred in society. Thus, Maya roots for artistic voices that engage in knowledge production on real life situations and represent the plight of the marginalized.

In another poem *Awakening in New York* (p. 183), she sees her poetry as the alarm that warns of “curtains forcing their will/against the wind” (p. 183) while the inhabitants of the city sleep peacefully. She therefore sees her poetic composition as a voice that seeks to awaken and inform her society. In the above two poems, she metaphorically refers to her poetry as a pen and an alarm, equating it to emancipatory ‘voices’ that enlighten. In the two poems, she also portrays her poems as symbols of knowledge production and tools of empowerment (and resistance) that endeavour to articulate issues of marginalized persons.

The use of voice as a power strategy in the poetry of Maya Angelou is centred on the notion that meaning is realized through a multiplicity of voices whose utterances are situated within past and future voices. The contexts within which utterances are produced therefore become important in the manifestation of power relations, such that through such utterances voice is employed for self-definition and agency as marginalized persons become “potential agents of their own story” (William Gamson;7). Hence, the narrative poem *Our Grandmothers* (p. 253) portrays how voice enables the grandmother to re-write the history of slavery and marginalization through self-definition. Further, the poem chronicles the agentic power of voice, through its use to re historicize events taking place way back in time, relate them to the present realities and thus, enabling the grandmother re negotiate her space in the society. The first stanza begins with the factual description of the grandmother living in animal like conditions where she is besieged by “hounds” and “hunters”. In this stanza, she lives in subalternity, at the mercy of the hunters. In the next stanza however, voice as resistance strategy is employed through the grandmother’s internal monologue as she states “I shall not, I shall not be moved” (p. 253).

In the third stanza, the intersection between using voice to exercise one’s power and its agentic employment as a resistance strategy is portrayed when the grandmother issues a call to her children to speak out and engage in collective resistance to oppression, by urging them to join her in raising their voices against their oppressors. “Unless you match my heart and words, “Saying with me, /I shall not be moved”” (p. 253). Thus, she encourages her children to use their voices to affirm their inner strength and deny the power of marginalization through the phrase, *I shall not be moved*.

She uses her voice to resist the power of naming exercised over her in the tenth stanza, through names such “Nigger, nigger bitch, heifer/ Mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon (p. 253). These names attempt to confer their own identity over the grandmother by dehumanizing her and equating her to objects and animals. Through the strategic use of words such as nigger, bitch, ape and baboon, a powerful image of

inferiority is created, whereby, the negative connotations of these names which include dirty, deficient, and undesirable become intertwined with her identity. This is done with the intention of effectively completing the ‘othering’ process. The word mammy for example is a derogative term used to refer to black slaves caring for white children, hence referring to her as mammy and property relegates her to an object to be owned and used. The voice of the oppressor also calls her “Whore, hot tail, thing, it”. This can be read in tandem with Bell Hooks’ observation that black women are stereotyped as sexual temptresses seducing white men to sin. Thus, the voice of the oppressor vocalizes stereotypical beliefs on the sexuality of African American women’s sexuality in order to portray the grandmother as unconforming to the sexual norms of society, hence othering her through such descriptions.

The grandmother however, resists the power of the oppressor’s voice by refusing the names conferred on her by the oppressor, and categorically stating that she cannot be moved by them. The exercise of power through one’s voice and taking up agency through self-naming is thus evident in this poem, which defies the otherness imposed by the oppressor’s description of her as uncultured, sexually depraved and inferior through the words; “property, creature, ape, baboon, whore” (p. 253). In the tenth stanza, she takes up agency to re-negotiate her identity and categorically states, “But my description cannot fit your tongue for/ I have a certain way /of being in this world” (p. 253). By seeing herself as capable of negotiating her own identity and reality, she engages in self re-definition, a form of knowledge production in which the new knowledge produced becomes a way in which voice is employed a resource for challenging the hegemony of culturally inscribed dominance.

The conferment of the demeaning names can also be read as an attempt to interpellate the woman. The use of her voice to offer her own definition then becomes a resistance strategy against interpellation, which is form of power exercise employed by the oppressors to keep their subjects in a place of subjectivity. The Althusserian concept of interpellation describes how persons are “positioned’ and shaped through certain machinations, including the naming and calling out of a person. Calling out and naming aims at interpellating an individual or group by constructing an identity for the interpellated person(s), thereby othering and discriminating them by situating them within particular discourses in society. The grandmother’s resistance to interpellation therefore portrays an intersection between voice and agency, where she voices her refusal to heed to the oppressor’s summons made through demeaning names and takes up agency by denying its power over her. By refusing to turn towards the hail of the oppressor, and using her own voice for self-definition, she rejects the summons of subjectivity and fashions for herself a new agentic position, where she is able to re

assert her right to existence in the world. Taking up agency and refusing to be interpellated into discourses of slavery and marginality enables her to re-assert her position in the world as a woman, grandmother and free citizen, again a form of empowerment.

Maya uses enjambment in the tenth stanza, putting a break at the first sentence of the first line before it is completed to portray the power of voice in resistance. By ending this line prematurely with the phrase “my description cannot” (p. 254) she uses the grandmother’s voice to emphasize the idea of identity as founded on lived experience and conscious awareness rather than tied to physical appearance, gender or social class. This stanza also signals the importance of voice and its intersection with agency; evidenced in the three lines quoted above, whereby, through the grandmother’s voice, Maya shifts from demonstrating the power of the voice to subjugate, to emphasizing its utilization as a resistance tool. This stanza therefore articulates both defiance enacted through voice, and affirmation, evidenced in the taking up of agency to re articulate one’s identity. Through the use of the capitalized conjunction “But” the speaker voices her resistance and effectively negates her designation as the “other”. This on one hand, enables her to exercise power by asserting her identity and while on the other hand staking her claim as a rightful inhabitant in of the world.

In the last two stanzas, the grandmother’s voice moves from historical times to the present to highlight knowledge on the contemporary plight of the marginalized such as abortion and life issues, gender and class-based discrimination and prostitution. The last stanza is a universal voice of all the marginalized which speaks from “the centre of the world’s stage”. The voice resists all forms of unfair representation and deception and categorically states that;

However I am perceived and deceived
However my ignorance and conceits be
Lay aside your fear that I will be undone
For I shall not be moved

(Angelou, p. 253).

To underscore the significance of voice and agency, the grandmother in this poem is also equated to women who have historically taken up agency to speak against social inequalities in the time they lived. Maya therefore states that the grandmother is “Harriet and Zora, / Mary Bethune and Angela, /Annie to Zenobia” (p. 256). The allusion to Harriet for example, is in reference to Harriet Stowe whose novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

depicted the atrocities of slavery, and was important in furthering the early anti-slavery cause in America. In the years before the civil war, Stowe's novel brought public attention to the horrors of slavery in a way that hadn't been done before. By using her voice to articulate the plight of slaves through the literary text, Harriet Stowe took up agency and successfully created an awareness that stirred reflection and action from the masses and authorities, bringing into public awareness the suffering and anguish of the slaves. To Maya Angelou, the grandmother by taking up agency to speak out for herself therefore, puts herself in the same league with the great women who have successfully spoken up and greatly impacted on the history of the marginalized in America and the world, such as Harriet, Zora Noel and Mary Bethune.

In *Caged Bird* (p. 194), the metaphoric caged bird in the poem is used to portray the interplay of voice and agency as a resistance tactic in the poetry of Maya. Through the image of a bird trapped inside the cage and described as having clipped wings and tied feet, Maya highlights knowledge on the predicament of the marginalized through the symbols of clipping and tying. The clipping of the wings can be interpreted as domination imposed through restrictions to upward mobility, such as those limiting economic and educational advancements for certain individuals and societies. The tying of feet on the other hand represents barriers placed on horizontal movement of the subjects, in their interactions within society. These restrictions can therefore be read as socially, economically and culturally enforced barriers such as those relating to race gender and social class.

The bird however, despite being clipped and tied engages the power of voice, "his wings are clipped and/ his feet are tied /so he opens his throat to sing" (p. 194). The use of the conjunction so to join the three lines above shows that the singing of the caged bird is a reaction to its marginality. Hence, the caged bird's song signifies the use of voice as a resistance strategy in the above three lines and stems from the bird's realization that despite the limitations imposed on all aspects of its mobility, he can exercise power through his voice to speak against this domination. The caged bird therefore, engages voice as a resistance strategy and as a vehicle for self-realization, such that, despite being tied and clipped "the caged bird sing opens its throat to sing". This song sung by the caged bird is described as a song of freedom, an indication that even in the silencing environment of oppression, the power of voice presents the possibility for resistance. It is important to remember that the act of singing is steeped in historical connotations of resistance dating back to the slavery era, when songs were not only used as a survival and mechanism but also as a coded commentary on oppressive social structures by both slaves and activists. Through the song of the caged bird Maya highlights the importance of voice in resistance against oppression.

She emphasizes on the transformative potential of the caged bird's song which not only enables self-representation in this poem but also provides the caged bird with empowerment and a sense of continuity:

The caged bird sings
With a fearful trill
Of things unknown
But longed for still
And his tune is heard
In the distant hill
For the caged bird sings of freedom
(Angelou, 194).

Maya also contrasts the metaphor of the caged bird with that of the free bird to underscore the importance of voice and agency as strategies of power and resistance. The description of the free bird is ironical. It is expected that a free bird would be more powerful than a caged bird, hence achieve more. However, from its description in the first stanza it is passive with no personal initiative, depending on other forces such as the wind and water for any form of movement:

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wings
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky
(Angelou, 194).

From the above stanza, it is evident that the free bird, despite being free from all restrictions of movement, is living in a state of powerlessness. In contrast to the caged bird, the free bird's wings are not clipped and his feet are free. However, the free bird neither uses his unclipped wings to fly, nor his unbound feet to walk, but leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream, an indication of an individual that lacks agency. While the caged bird discussed above uses his voice to resist oppression, the free bird on the other hand engages in fantasy, daring to claim the sky, thinking of breezes and fat worms. These fantasies amount to nothing, as the caged bird stands

on the grave of these dreams and still opens his throat to sing.

The metaphor of the free bird is a manifestation of the futility of the power of voice if not exercised by an individual. The contrast between the two metaphorical birds is employed by Maya to show that no matter what situation one finds themselves in, without raising their voice against oppression, their dreams end in graves. The caged bird dreams of freedom and opens his mouth to sing, and his sing is heard all over, such that his motive for singing is actualized. On the other hand, the free bird dreams of breezes, fat worms, owning the sky, but only leaps on the wind, hence, his dreams end up in the grave. By exercising power through singing the song of freedom, the caged bird resists oppression, while the free bird fails to attain any form actualization by not exercising their power.

1.4 Conclusion

This study investigated the interplay between voice, agency and empowerment in the poetry of Maya Angelou. The study demonstrated how these concepts are intertwined through that though certain person marginalized by intersecting discourses such as those of social class, race and sexism, the appropriation of voice and agency enables them to engage in knowledge production and resist marginalization. Through an analysis of the poem *Our Grandmothers*, the study demonstrated that voice and agency, when utilized by ordinary persons can be as effective in resistance as the actions of people that have historically impacted on world leadership and politics. Further through an analysis of *Caged Bird*, the study demonstrated that voice and agency can enable persons facing multiple facets of marginalization to speak out, be heard and articulate their issues. As demonstrated in the analysis of the metaphor of the free bird within the same poem, persons even though not under any form of marginalization, face fail to utilize the power of agency and voice cannot realize their dreams.

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