

MARXIST FEMINISM IN “WOMAN WORK”
BY MAYA ANGELOU

IRAM TARIQ SHAH

Iramtariq74@gmail.com

FAREEHA UMAR

fareehahmed786@yahoo.com

Abstract

The following analysis focuses on the poem “Woman Work” by Maya Angelou, an American poetess and a black woman, who raised her voice for women of that times those were slaves in the household and society as well.

Following are the key features of Marxist feminism:

- *Sense of alienation*
- *Want of identity*
- *Wish of freedom*

This poem was analyzed in perspective of feminism theory and it was all about self-exploration mainly through the poetry and primarily by women. The major themes of Maya Angelou works focus on feminism, identity crises, family and racism.

Keywords: Marxist Feminism, Stylistic Analysis, Domestic Slavery, Self-Identity, Alienation, American Society.

Introduction:

“Marxist feminism is a branch of feminism focused on investigating and explaining the ways in which women are oppressed through systems of capitalism and private property”.

This poem portrays the laborious routine of an ordinary woman of the society. That woman is supposed to look after her domestic and family life not only by carrying out domestic work thrice a day but also does other tasks such as children care, arranging grocery from the market, iron the cloths, maintenance and harvesting the small kitchen garden, etc.

This laborious routine makes her tired and she wants rest. The only console for her is the nature for soothing and making her life joyous to some extent. She considers the nature as her companion and calls it to shower snowflakes and cozy sunshine on her.

Modern era has changed the life of man and makes the life very fast. But when a person became fed up after the continuous work of whole the day, then he tries to find relief in the lap of nature.

Natural scenes get him out of all the worries of life and he feels himself the most lucky person of the world.

Objective:

- To analyze the poem stylistically.
- To analyze poem in the light of feminism.

Methodology:

This research aims to have stylistics analysis of the poem "Woman Work" by Maya Angelou. The description of this study is analytical. The poem is evaluated from the rhetoric and lexical perspectives as under:

Stylistic Analysis Of The Poem:

1. Rhyme:

Rhyming scheme can be observed in the first 14 lines of the poem as: aa, bb, cc, dd, ee, ff, gg, while the other lines are without rhyme except lines 16 and 18 in which "rain" and "again" are rhymed.

“Rain on me, rain”

“And cool my brow again.”

Maya distort the rhyme scheme deliberately to demonstrate that the working woman wants relief after the dull and rough daily routine.

2. Rhythm:

It is noted that steady rhythm in the stanzas of poem is not kept intact, whereas lines 1 - 14 are relatively short of 4 to 7 syllables, every word in those lines is one syllable.

3. Tone:

The tone of this poem is gloomy since the nature is being called upon for help by a hectic woman for the sake of enjoyment and relief. Last 4 stanzas illustrate the style of the poem, but this style is perfectly depicted in the last stanzas of the poem:

“Sun, rain, curving sky

Mountain, oceans, leaf, and stone

Star shine, moon glow

You're all that I can call my own.”

4. Imagery:

Imagery is graphic language that arouses a sensory experience like sound, sight, smell and taste. The imagery is elaborated in the second stanza, where some of the instances of images are mentioned such as dewdrops, sunshine and rain.

“Shine on me, sunshine

Rain on me, rain

Fall softly, dewdrops”

In the third stanza of the poem, the words and phrases such as storm, blow, fiercest wind and float are the examples of beautiful imagery.

“Storm, blow me from here

With your fiercest wind

Let me float across the sky”

There is other classic example of imagery in the fourth stanza i.e. snowflakes fall gently; giving cold, icy kisses:

“Fall gently, snowflakes

Cover me with white

Cold icy kisses and

Let me rest tonight.”

The fifth stanza also contains certain lovely examples of imagery like curving sky, mountain, oceans, star shine and moon glow, etc.:

“Sun, rain, curving sky

Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone

Star shine, moon glow”

5. Personification:

In the personification, the objects are denoted as the human characteristics. In this poem lines 17 and 18, “dewdrops cool her brow” is an example:

“Fall softly, dewdrops And cool my brow again.”

The snowflakes cover the woman, giving her the feeling of cold icy kisses; is an act of comfort and involves another human in poem line nos: 23-25,

“Fall gently, snowflakes
Cover me with white
Cold icy kisses and”

6. Symbolism:

Symbolism is a device which poets use to give style to their writings. The use of the object to represent the ideas. Many symbols are used in this poem.

The Rain symbolizes the distillation and respite.

“Rain on me, rain”

“Sun, rain, curving sky”

The Snowflakes symbolizes the harmony and rest

“Fall gently, snowflakes”

The Sunshine symbolizes for the manifestation of nature.

“Shine on me, sunshine”

The Storm stands symbolizes as the inner desire for hard.

“Storm, blow me from here”

Dewdrops stands for the coziness and respite.

“Fall softly, dewdrops”

Lexical Analysis:

Different varieties of lexemes have been used by Maya Angelou in her poem women work. These lexical verities have grammatical function (Part of speech). The lexical verities are shown in following chart:

Noun	Adjective	Verb	Preposition
Company	Fiercest	Fry	From
Children	Cold	Dry	To
Clothes	Icy	Feed	With
Food	Cool	Weed	On

Chicken	Gently	Shop	Till
Floor	Softly	Got	
Garden	White	Mop	

Themes:

The theme refers to the central idea of a text. The major themes of the poem are based on the idea of feminism, bondage, self-consciousness, cultural norms, exploitation and nature.

These themes are conferred with special references from the poem as follows:

1. Slavery:

"Woman Work" is basically a true picture of typical African American Women of that time who has to perform all household jobs single handedly without any required break.

The lines number 11 and 14 clearly transform the whole impression because the women of modern America were not allowed to cut sugar cane or pick cotton. It indicates that the woman were considered as a slave.

“The cane to be cut”

“And the cotton to pick.”

The houses of the “Masters” have been criticized by using the word “Hut”, which is associated with poverty or slavery in this poem. Considering nature her own is very painful and the only thing she can call as her own. The hut in line 12 demonstrates that the female is a slave.

“I gotta clean up this hut”

The concluding line of the poem also proposes the life of a bondage for woman and she only finds reprieve in the hands of nature and calls the nature as her own.

“You're all that I can call my own.”

2. Self-Identity:

One of the main theme of the poem is “Lost” self-Identity, where a bondswoman is in want of entertainment and asking nature for this purpose. She wants to have rest, as the lines 22 and 26 provide the idea that her own world is devastated.

“Till I can rest again.”

“Let me rest tonight.”

It is the tragedy of the life of slaves that they cannot find happiness. She worked hard in the society of white people to prove her existence but due to hard work and hectic routine she cannot have rest at all.

3. African American Culture:

In America, the white people took slavery as a custom. As the poem reflects the subject of slavery. It also depicts the life of Black people and how they treat their woman. This poem also focuses on the fact that there is inequality in the social circles, white people take the benefits and cherish their life as masters and the black people serve as a slaves and having a miserable life.

4. Exploitation:

Exploitation means to work extensively for others benefit. In the poem in 1st stanza, it is crystal clear that the woman is a slave. The woman works all the time for her master. When she completes all the work of the day a new cycle is ready to perform again. She is performing all the tasks for others benefits and because of the hectic routine of all through the day, she is tired and feels sleepy.

5. Nature:

We can find the peaceful qualities of nature in the words like gentle snowflakes, curving sky, cooling dewdrops, the sunshine, mountains, stars, and rain.

The last stanza is a perfect example of nature in the poem:

"Sun, rain, curving sky Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone Star shine, moon glow" the imagery give the naturalism and narrates this modern machine-driven life man prefer nature.

The main constituent of Marxist feminism is capitalization in which women are demoralized through entrepreneurship as they were used as the private property for men; other elements of the theory are: affective labor, emotional labor, class less society, wages for household work, reproductive labor, social wages, inter-sectionality. The analysis of the poem is made on the above-mentioned aspects.

class less society:

The first and second stanzas of the poem expresses the hard labor of the women of that time. In verses as follows:

- I've got the children to tend
- And the cotton to pick.

The purpose of Marxist theory was to establish a class less society where both the upper- and lower-class people are treated equally. At that time women were supposed to be inferior to men and did not enjoy equal rights as these lines depicts that men of those times were not involved in household duties. On the other hand, women who belongs to poor families were discriminated against in the field of labor while upper class ladies enjoyed certain privileges without putting in any labor. By creation of a class less society, Marxist vision was to ensure that there was collective honor ship and dignity of women in society.

Emotional labor:

Another element of this theory is emotional labor of the women. It points towards the labor that women have to be involved in and for keeping there family members emotionally stable in the following lines of the poem:

- I got company to feed
- I gotta clean up this hut
- Then see about the sick

She was equally worried to ensure the well being of the entire family. Even in employment there was emphasis on the emotional labor on women to fulfill the job requirement.

Inter-sectionality:

The poem is based the idea of Inter-sectionality, Maya Angelo was the true representative of women of that time especially Black- Africa woman who were considered inferior, slave and discriminated that society and even in house hold. The first and second stanzas of the poem are the real example of the inter-sectionality which prevailed in that time.

Reproductive labor:

The reproductive labor is another crucial element of feminism. Under this element women perform the very important role of bearing children, dressing up their tots and moreover to look after the sick one, and for which they were not paid anything in return. Marks had the opinion that capitalists were responsible for having control over a woman's sexual desires because they were considered production machine rather than humans. As, they had no control over their bodies.

- The baby to dry

- The tots to dress
- Then see about the sick

House hold duties without wages:

The women were not encouraged to engage in productive labor in the industry and were largely subjected to house hold. The poem presents the opinion that private property was the main reason for exploitation of women and there was a need to improve their working condition both in their house or work place.

Appeal to pathos:

In the last stanzas of the poem the poetess successfully generates the appeal to pathos in her reader's mind.

- you're all that I can call my own.

In these verses indicates the helplessness of a women, we can be observed that she is all alone in spite of a family and a hut, whom she cannot call her own.

Nature as a source of catharsis:

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, she finds her soul catharsis in the elements of nature. She is seeking comfort inn the hands of nature. she is calling natural phenomena like sunshine, snowflakes, rain, dew drops, storm, curving sky, mountains, oceans, moon.

- Till I can rest again.

As this state can be compared with the lines of the poem "New Year's Resolution" by Elizabeth Sewell in the following verses:

Will lie O'nights

In the bony arms

Of Reality and be comforted.

Conclusion

Without exaggeration, the poem is of unique importance as it presents the real tough, bore and hectic routine of African American woman of that time, but unfortunately that “woman” is still a part of present day society. First stanza elaborates the busy routine of the woman and 2nd elaborates the deep desires of the woman to enjoy her life for the fulfillment of her desire, she seeks help from the nature. The irregular rhymes are also the major characteristics of this poem.

This skill is used to reflect that “change is compulsory for every living thing”, which fully justifies the miseries of working woman as portrayed in this poem.

Inessa Armand, a French-Russian communist politician, rightly made the following observation, “if women liberation is unthinkable without communism, the communism is unthinkable without women liberation”.

The domestic slavery is the concern of Marxist Feminism.

Appendix

POEM: WOMAN WORK BY MAYA ANGELOU

I've got the children to tend

The clothes to mend

The floor to mop

The food to shop

Then the chicken to fry

The baby to dry

I got company to feed

The garden to weed

I've got shirts to press

The tots to dress

The can to be cut

I gotta clean up this hut

Then see about the sick

And the cotton to pick.

Shine on me, sunshine

Rain on me, rain

Fall softly, dewdrops

And cool my brow again.

Storm, blow me from here

With your fiercest wind

Let me float across the sky

'Til I can rest again.

Fall gently, snowflakes
Cover me with white
Cold icy kisses and
Let me rest tonight.
Sun, rain, curving sky
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow
You're all that I can call my own

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