

## **“Woman work” by Maya Angelou in the Perspective of Marxist Feminism**

**\*Sadiqa Batool Naqvi**

**\*\*Amna Afzal**

**\*\*\*Misbah Aslam**

### **Abstract**

The following research paper focuses upon the note of Marxist Feminism in “Woman Work” by Maya Angelou. It will be elaborated through the analytical interpretation of narrator’s wish of escapism into the World of Nature, by denouncing the dull, monotonous and dreary routine of domestic life. Sense of alienation, search for identity and Marxist Feminism, implied in this wish will be analyzed and investigated through a critical evaluation of the poem.

### **Key Words**

Marxist Feminism, Escapism, Alienation, Identity, Domestic Slavery

## 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”.*

Inessa Armend, the first leader of the Women’s department of the 1917 Russian Revolution, made the following observation:

*“If women’s liberation is unthinkable without communism, then communism is unthinkable without women’s liberation”*

And the Marxist tradition has from its beginning, with the writings of Karl Marx and Engels, stood for the liberation of women. As early, as “The Communist Manifesto” Marx and Engels argued that the ruling class oppresses women, relegating them to second class citizenship in society and within the family:

*“The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production .... He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at (by communists) is to do away with the state of women as mere instrument of production”.*

So one thing that stands out from the beginning of the Marxist tradition on women’s liberation is that women’s issues have never been viewed theoretically as only the concern of women, but were a concern of all revolutionary leaders, male and female. The Russian Revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote,

*“In order to change the conditions of life, we must learn to see them through the eyes of women”*

Likewise Russian revolutionary Lenin commonly referred to women’s oppression within the family as “domestic slavery.” This domestic slavery is the concern of Marxist Feminism. To give equal rights to woman and to liberate her from the cruel clutches of the monster of domestic imprisonment, of family and its obligations and to provide her fresh air to breathe and to assert her will, last but not the least, to treat her as human and not as slave.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While delving deep into the treasure of feminist literature, Marxist feminism seems to be a recurring theme. Whether it is Nora of “*The Doll’s House*”, Mathilda of “*The Necklace*”, Feroza of “*An American Brat*”, Tess of “*The D’ Urbervilles*” or Susan of “*To Room 19*”; the yearning for self-identity, assertion of free will and to search one’s real or the other self is manifested everywhere. All of the above-mentioned characters become a prey to financial circumstances or that of domestic slavery. This search for self-assertion and refusal to be

exploited by the beguiling wiles of gender exploitation urges Nora (*The Doll's House*) to denounce her home and children, compels Susan (*To Room 19*) to isolate herself in a secluded room and makes Tess (*Tess of The D'Urbervilles*) and Mathilda (*The Necklace*) the incarnation of tragedy. Same crisis can be traced in Fay Weldon's "*Weekend*" where Martha is facing a conflict between family and career and the heart rendering lyrics of Tracy Chapman,

*"The woman's work is never done"*

The narrator of "*Woman Work*" by Maya Angelou also feels the burden of living a meaningless and drab life and invokes the objects of Nature to escape into a world of imagination.

## **THE POETESS**

Maya Angelou (April 4 1928-May 28, 2014) known as "The Black Women's Poet Laureate" and her poems have been called "The Anthems of African Americans". She was not only a poet, an author, but proved her genius in teaching, dancing and acting also. Her career includes civil rights activism, singing & film directing. Best known of her series of six autobiographical volumes, focusing on her childhood and early adult experiences. With the publication of "*I know why the Caged Bird sings*", she was recognized as a new kind of memoirist, one of the first African American women who was not hesitant to discuss her personal life. She was highly respected as a spokesperson for Black people and women. In 1993, Angelou recited her poem "*On the Pulse of Morning*" at President Bill Clinton's inauguration, the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. The major themes in her works focus on feminism, identity crisis, family and racism.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE POEM**

As regards American literature in 1970s is concerned it was a true reflection of social, political, economic and cultural changes of the time. It was all about self-exploration, mainly through poetry and primarily by women. Parallel to the increased exploration of racism and feminism was the rise in the interest of African, American writers and their works. Popular poets of the decade include Maya Angelou, Niki Giovanni and Gwendolyn Brooks, each of whom wrote about women, their lives as African Americans, and the hardships experienced as both.

## THE POEM

Keeping in mind the feministic tone of the poem it will be appropriate to use the following lines as a prologue to our analysis of 'Woman Work'. It seems as if these lines are also uttered by a downtrodden and suppressed woman who yearns to rise like a Sphinx from the ashes of her soul,

*“You may shoot me with you words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise”*

While going through the poem” *Woman Work*, the first two stanzas produce a chilling effect on our nerves. The long, unending, monotonous routine of a housewife makes us short of breathing for sometimes. The question arises’ *“Is she a robot or a human?”* She literally reflects the idea propagated by William Davies, *“we have no time to stand and stare”*. All domestic chores, one after the other, show that she not only attends the children, husband and other family members, but performs her duties as a gardener, sweeper and caretaker also. The first line starting with ‘*I’ve*’ stresses upon the fact that she has to do all this. This domestic slavery is obligatory for her. Some critics take the narrator not only as a conventional housewife but as an African American slave woman who is forced to do this labour owing to her skin colour and racial prejudice. Whatever is the case but it is a fact that this laborious routine is taking its toll and the helpless woman is panting under the yolk of this slavery. Here we feel the echo of the term ‘*Marxist Feminism*’ because when women are deprived of their basic rights and imprisoned in the four walls of their so called houses, their unpaid services are exploited by their husbands; then all of their sacrifices, devotion and struggle is taken for granted. Male Chauvinism can commit any atrocity considering it his basic right. Maya Angelou, who herself became a victim of barbarism at the age of eight, which thrust her in to the nightmarish dumbness; feels for all the suffering women. They do not need bread and shelter only but their own identity, self-respect and individuality also. When a women, passing through the desert of suppressed desires, working like machine, becomes perturbed and finds no solace or respite, no shoulder to cry upon; then bony arms of realty seem to strangulate her and she tries to search for her other or real self. We find the same desire in Doris Lessing’s *“To Room 19”* where Susan tries to search for her lost self, first isolates herself in Mother’s room and then to Room 19 in a hotel. When situation deteriorates further, she lost herself into the forgetfulness of death. Here again in third stanza the mood of

the narrator changes. In first two stanzas, it seems as if she is talking aloud but nobody is listening because it is obvious that no one else is there. She seems to speak in trance like state. When her complaints remain unanswered, then she directs her attention to the objects of Nature or towards the benign, benevolent, Mother Nature, who keeps her arms ever ready for her bruised children. She invokes the objects of Nature to soothe and comfort her. This sense of escapism is the direct result of isolated and neglected real self in the capitalistic set up of a walled structure which is called home but” *is it really home or the tomb of her desires?*” Her whole soul is burning due to icy and ruthless behavior of her family. Her plaintive notes pierce even the leaden hearts, when says,

*“Shine on me, sunshine,  
Rain on me , rain  
Fall softly, dew drops  
And cool my brow again”*

When human beings turn into mere, walking shadows, or pose like hollow and stuffed creatures, when even looking around us seems like a wastage of time; then who can be trusted except sun, rain or dewdrops. Her burning soul can only quench her thirst if raindrops fall on her. The gloom of her heart can be illuminated by the dazzling light of sun only. Her burning forehead is deprived of the soft and healing touch of a dear of near one, so it can only be comforted by the soft rhythm of dewdrops.

In next stanza she addresses to fierce and stormy wind to float her across the sky ‘*till I can rest again*’. How strange it seems that instead of lying in a bed, she prefers to float across the sky, like stray leaves, to take rest. Here striking similarities can be drawn between this stanza and that of” *Ode to The West wind*” by P.B. Shelley,

*“O lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud,  
Ifall upon the thorns of life I bleed,  
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed,  
One too like thee, tame less & swift and proud”*

Though the narrator is also lying on the thorns of life and is bleeding but her escapism is entirely different from the romantic escapism of Shelley and other such poets. Escapism is the term used for,

*“An inclination to retreat from unpleasant realities through diversion of fantasy”*

She is not living in a dream world or desires for ‘*Utopia*’ but searching for her lost self; her own identity, the reward of her unending struggle. She needs sunshine as the symbol of hope

and strength and wants rain to purify herself from the pollution of the callous world to which she belongs. Though imprisoned by the barbaric customs and rigid taboos of society, she raises her voice to tell the world that the temporary dumbness sometimes converts into a resonant and forceful cry, which cannot be suppressed. Sometimes chains of a prisoner proclaim his predicament. Here the cry of this ‘*exploited*’ woman reminds about another poem of Maya Angelou “*I know why the caged Bird sings*”

*“But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams,  
His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream,  
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied,  
So he opens his throat to sing”*

In fifth stanza, she addresses snowflakes to cover her body. The cold, icy kisses of snow seem so welcoming to her that she wants to enjoy at least one night of rest just like a prisoner who is released on parole, “*let me rest tonight* “What does it mean?”. Why is she so much restless? Even one night away from her home in the company of Nature is preferable to her. This insomnia is the result of too much labour sans appreciation or acknowledgement,

*“There are some nights when  
Sleep plays coy,  
Aloof and disdainful,  
And all the wiles  
That I employ to win  
Its service to my side,  
Are useless as wounded pride,  
And much more painful”*

The desire to take some rest or respite even for a single night points towards the insomnia suffered by the woman who exhausts herself to death during the day. But it is surprising that despite so much exertion she cannot go to sleep. Definitely, some mental or psychological ailment keeps her awake. In the present stanza as well as in the previous one the word ‘*rest*’ is repeated twice. At one place she says, ‘*Till I can rest again*’ and then reiterates, “*Let me rest tonight*” It is pertinent to note here that she does not escape like the heroine of “*To Room 19*” to commit suicide, but only wants a short break to refresh and relax herself. Last stanza is the most emphatic and touching where the predicament of a lonely soul has been exposed. The woman who is taken as an entity or commodity, when realizes her worthlessness and absurdity of life, she invokes the objects of Nature one by one,

*“Sun, rain, curving sky  
Mountains, oceans, leaf and stone,  
Star Shine, moon glow,*

And finally gives vent to her suppressed emotions and creates such a beauty in world literature by uttering the following line,

*“You’re all that I can call my own”*

It can be inferred from the above-mentioned line that she is going through the extreme phase of alienation and estrangement in her own family. This is the tragedy of modern, mechanical existence. She has been taken for granted because her role is only to labour and the fruit belongs to someone else. Therefore, no one is her own. Just like Samsa of “*Metamorphosis*” when she comes to know about her worthless existence in the maze of life she decided to pluck herself away and seeks refuge in Nature. The sun, moon, rain, leaf and stone are her friends and siblings. Therefore, the end of the poem reinforces the idea of Marxist Feminism that equality of rights and financial independence is compulsory for a woman’s survival.

## **Findings**

After critically evaluating the whole poem it is proved that behind the escapist tendency in ‘*Woman Work*’ some implied irony is prevalent. It is a series of symptoms ranging from estrangement (alienation), absurdity of life, identity crisis, search for the real self, insomniac nights and finally escapism. However, the diagnosis leads to one root cause, which is Marxist notion of giving liberty, equality of rights and financial independence to women. To rescue her from the clutches of the capitalist; her own husband or all those characters who hold her reins.

## CONCLUSION

The arguments discussed above aptly justify the implied theme of *Marxist Feminism* in this realistic, simple, artistic, thought provoking and touching poem. The attempt to read between the lines makes it the tragic cry of a perturbed soul who wants to shun this snobbish and materialist world. We may conclude with the following lines of another poem with the same title,

*“Early in the morning she rises,  
The woman’s work is never done,  
And it is not because she doesn’t try,  
She is fighting a battle with no one on her side”*

## References

- 1) [www.azlyrics.com>lyrics>womanswork](http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/womanswork).
- 2) [www.poemhunter.com/maya-angelou/](http://www.poemhunter.com/maya-angelou/)
- 3) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/marxist\\_feminism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/marxist_feminism).
- 4) [Socialistworker.org/2013/01/31/Marxism-feminism-and-womens-liberation](http://Socialistworker.org/2013/01/31/Marxism-feminism-and-womens-liberation).
- 5) [www.humbleisd.net](http://www.humbleisd.net)
- 6) [www.davidpbrown.co.uk/poetry/william-henry-davies.html](http://www.davidpbrown.co.uk/poetry/william-henry-davies.html)
- 7) [www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174401](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174401)
- 8) [www.enotes.com>studyguides>To Room Nineteen](http://www.enotes.com/studyguides/To_Room_Nineteen).
- 9) [www.thefreedictionary.com/escapism](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/escapism)
- 10) [www.sparknotes.com/lit/metamorph/](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/metamorph/)
- 11) [www.enotes.com/topics/an-american-brat](http://www.enotes.com/topics/an-american-brat)
- 12) [www.sparknotes.com/lit/dollhouse](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dollhouse)
- 13) [www.enotes.com/topics/necklace](http://www.enotes.com/topics/necklace)
- 14) [https://m.grin.com>document](https://m.grin.com/document)
- 15) [mt.china-papers.com](http://mt.china-papers.com)

## APPENDIX

### *Woman Work*

*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.*