



The Spirit of Hope and Resilience in Mushrooms by Sylvia Plath and Still I Rise by Maya Angelou

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Abstract

Poetry is a powerful vessel to convey philosophy with rhythm in a few words and to express the multifaceted experiences of feminism. Poetry facilitates us to continue to persist in face of despair. The paper critically examines and compares the poems- Mushrooms by Sylvia Plath and Still I Rise by Maya Angelou and aims to discuss the spirit of hope and the concept of resilience in both the poems. It focuses on women's suffering and how they were perceived in a male- dominated society. Both the poems encourage us to think about the experience of women and thereby ensue a sense of hope and resilience. Though Maya and Sylvia treat the same theme using the same approach, both of them differs in shaping the poem with the feministic tool. Maya mix up the anti-black racist images along with feministic whereas Sylvia follows the main stream of feminism. In Mushrooms, Plath indicates that the female power lies in being united and foreshadows the uprising of women and encourages women to unite to form a common voice. Whereas in Still I Rise Angelou talks about individual oppression and rise above all the adversities and assert her individual identity. Through their poems Angelou and Plath offer deep reflections and pose thought provoking questions to their readers. Both champion womanhood and rising above oppression. Both the poems insist on the power and endurance of feminine spirit.

Key Words: *Feminism, Identity, Hope, Resilience*

Introduction

Life is a journey that explores the joy of giving and understands the misery of being. But in times of distress and dejection, resilience is the element that helps us achieve our dreams and overcome our fears. In times of despondency, grief and adversity, poetry can provide comfort and can have a therapeutic effect. Poetry captures and conveys a message like no other form of literature. Since ancient times, poetry has been an influential form of expression and has been used to convey emotions and inspire change. Using rhymes, meter, rhythm and figurative language, poetry creates a profound musical impact on the mind of the reader and thereby shape our world. It soothes our mind and uplifts our spirits. Using words, poet challenges oppressive system and speaks against injustice Poetry has the power to encourage disrupted souls and can pave paths that are full of possibilities. It facilitates us to continue to persist in face of despair. It has been used as a tool for promoting gender equilibrium and instill the spirit of hope and resilience. It is a

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powerful vessel to convey philosophy with rhythm in a few words and to express the multifaceted experiences of feminism.

Feminism

Feminism, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, is “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state” (“Feminism”).

Barbara Smith, an American lesbian feminist, offers a different definition of feminism: “Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women – as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement”. (qtd. in Dicker 7)

Second Wave Feminism

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir, a radical and a noteworthy French feminist, published her book *The Second Sex*. This book is regarded as a groundbreaking work of feminist philosophy and as the starting inspiration point of second-wave feminism. In the book, de Beauvoir made an analysis of the western notion of woman. She asserted that the belief of gender was not biologically inherited but it was enforced on women by the society they lived in. She remarked:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir 330).

Among many feminists, who were inspired by de Beauvoir’s writings, Betty Friedan was one of them. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* can be linked with the beginning of the second wave feminism. *The Feminine Mystique* discussed “the problem that has no name” - the general unhappiness of American women in the 1960s and 70s. Through the book, Betty Friedan exposed the discrimination against all women resonated through the culture. Friedan draws attention to how women are confined to the home and menial jobs, which causes them to lose their identity and individuality. This is the fault of the advertising industry and the educational system. Women who were touched by this book were found all over the United States of America. As a result, the Second Wave of feminism began, attracting thousands of white middle-class women to the cause. Due to their dual marginalization based on race and sex, black women's situation was much worse. Early in the 1960s, second wave feminism got underway. It was a response to women going back to being mothers and housewives following the Second World War. The men that had to leave the workforce to join the defense forces had returned and women were fired from their positions and replaced by men.

The movement placed a strong emphasis on issues like rape, reproductive rights, domestic abuse, and workplace safety. It also made a concerted effort to change the



stereotype of women in popular culture from one of inferiority and negativity to one of strength and realism. Women authored their own popular culture, and feminist literature, music, films, and even dining establishments helped to propagate the movement. The overall sense of camaraderie amongst women battling for equality can be used to describe the Second Wave. Several forms of feminism were also developed during this time. Radical feminism, which called for the total abolition of male dominance and the questioning of all gender roles, was widely accepted.

While first wave feminism (the suffragette movement) focused on securing women's rights to vote and to own property, second wave feminism began to tackle more nuanced social issues surrounding gender disparity. The term second wave feminism refers to the radical feminism of women's liberation movement. The poetry of this era comments on social issues with the use of allegory and metaphor. As Nancy Berke suggests, poetry was not only an individual means of expression for the poet, but a 'tool' for movement building and resistance.

There is a close coalition between second wave feminism and feminist poetry. Feminist poetry was influenced not only by social change, but also by poets such as Emily Dickinson, who lived decades earlier. During the 1960s, many poets in the United States discovered increased social awareness and self-actualization. This included feminists, who claimed their place in society, poetry and political discourse. As a movement, feminist poetry is usually thought of as reaching a greater height during the 1970s. Feminist poets were prolific and they began to achieve major critical acclaim, including several Pulitzer Prizes.

Maya Angelou and Sylvia Plath are two eminent poets who have contributed the power of their poetical voices to our society. Both show that poetry plays a key role in bringing the change that need to be changed. Both the poems selected in this paper- *Mushrooms* by Sylvia Plath and *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou present second wave feminist perspective. The paper analyses the poems in terms of sexuality, family and search for identity, which are the main issues of the second wave of feminism. This paper compares the poems *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou and *Mushrooms* by Sylvia Plath to find how the poets have used black feminism and white feminism in their works.

The paper critically examines and compares the poems- *Mushrooms* by Sylvia Plath and *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou. It aims to discuss the concept of hope and resilience in *Mushrooms* by Sylvia Plath and *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou. Through their poetry, both the poets focus on women's suffering and how they were perceived in male- dominated society. Both the poems encourage us to think about the experience of women.



***Mushrooms* by Sylvia Plath**

A poet, novelist and a short story writer, Sylvia Plath became a feminist icon and is best known for advancing the genre of confessional poetry. She is one of the defining voices in twentieth century poetry. Plath never considered herself a feminist, yet her prose and poetry deal with issues which became relevant to the second wave of feminism. She published her first poem at the age of eight and her most well-known works are her collections: 'The Colossus and other poems' (1960) and 'Ariel' (1965).

The poem *Mushrooms* deals with the plight of women especially housewives after World War II. Jessica Fernquist writes in her essay titled "Assessing Sylvia Plath's poetry" that. "*Mushrooms* is a striking social commentary on the struggle of women to overcome the restraints of the housewife image."

The poem was included in "The Colossus and Other Poems," Plath's debut collection. A potent and incredibly metaphorical poem about the fight for women's rights is called *Mushrooms*. The poem's plot revolves around a group of mushrooms that silently grow in a forest at night. They slowly emerge from the fissures in a city pavement and poke their heads from the leafy, pine-needled forest floor. However, the poem is really a long, elaborate metaphor at its core. The mushrooms appear to be symbolic of women leading silent revolutions.

The poem equates the predicament of women to the life of mushrooms. Mushrooms symbolize women and their firm determination. The opening lines suggest that the women will silently gather strength and will establish themselves irrespective of men's resistance:

"Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room". (Plath, 7-9)

The gradual movement of the mushrooms suggest their gradual strengthening. Like mushrooms, women are overshadowed and unnoticed in the male dominated world and are treated like pizza toppings. But one day they will change the established belief of the male – dominated society. Though mushrooms are meek, vulnerable, fragile and ignored, their struggle is persistent and powerful. When they grow up, they flourish and rise in their own way. Similarly, the life of a woman is difficult and full of struggle but with hope and determination, they rise above all and gain their voice and identity.

Like mushrooms, women are flourishing quietly and are gaining ground. They are striving hard and are uprising. They are bereaved of their individual identity and are always treated as 'shadow' of men. They are used as 'shelves' and 'tables'. But despite all such obstacles, they move on and are steadily raising their voice for identity.



Like timid mushrooms that grow “whitely, discreetly/ very discreetly” (Plath, 2-3), women too, go largely unnoticed. They seek out ‘air’ as if they have been devoid of it and suffocated. The mushrooms grow in secret with no one noticing their presence. No one is there to ‘betray’ them or to ‘stop’ them from progressing. They are not ‘toes’ and ‘noses’ any more. They are ‘fists’ and insist on moving pine needle and are uprising. They are quiet and persistent in their progress. They had acquired their basic need and will give ground. The first three stanzas explain that women will quietly gather strength and will establish themselves despite men’s resistance:

“The small grains make room” (Plath, 9)

They lack not only ears and eyes but also lack a voice. Still they push themselves through holes to grow to a full stature. The poet then emphasized on their meagre diet and the conditions they had to live under. They would “diet on water/ on crumbs of shadow” (Plath, 19- 20). Nevertheless, they are successful at multiplying and there are “So many of us!” (Plath, 23). This suggests that women are rising and are taking on voices of their own. They will continue to ‘nudge’ and ‘shove’ their way through the ground. When united, they will take control over the world. The poem ends positively suggesting that they shall inherit the Earth and get their “foot in the door” (Plath, 33).

There is a Biblical allusion to the Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, in which he says, “Blessed are the meek: for they will inherit the earth” (Constantakis 123).

Masal (2006) comments that the poem describes-

“the mass growth and movement of mushrooms as they come upwards through the ground. That the mushrooms eventually have taken over the world.”

As Constantakis writes,

“Plath uses a visible thing, the growth of mushrooms, to suggest an abstract thing, the feminist uprising and the empowerment of women” (Constantakis 125).

The poem expresses a ray of hope that eventually women will get the respect they deserve. It paints the picture of quiet revolution through subtle metaphor and vivid imagery. Though it talks about the oppression of women, it does not tell a story of despair. The greatest strength of the poem is the fact that though it deals with silent oppression, it is without being pushy or noisy. The poem carries the idea of gaining power and control.

Still I Rise by Maya Angelou

Seven autobiographies have been written by the prolific and inspirational American poet, actress, civil rights activist, producer, and director Maya Angelou, whose real name was Marguerite Annie Johnson. Her poetry has received a lot of attention for its portrayals of Black beauty, feminine beauty, and the human spirit. Her book *Just Give Me a Cool Drink*



of Water 'fore I Die, published in 1971, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1972. Angelou received the Literarian Award in 2013, an honorary National Book Award for contributions to the literary community. In 2017, her life was celebrated in the documentary *Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise*.

Written by iconic Maya Angelou in 1978, *Still I Rise* is an inspiring and a wonderfully self-assertive poem that talks about picking yourself up and striving to achieve identity even in the face of adversity. It focuses on the importance of determination and persistence. It was used as an advertising campaign by the UNCF (United Negro College Fund) in the U.S. in 1994.

The poem talks about individual oppression and discrimination as a black woman. *Still I rise*, demonstrates the way the poet contributes towards shaping the identity of woman in general by being a motivational force to them. She stands for her liberal rights which have been offended for her whole race and society. As one move through the lines of the poem, one can observe how optimistically the poet deals with the issues of women marginalization and racism by being a bridge of change and inspiring the reader not to lose their hope. The poem opens with the obstacles and oppressions, Angelou faces in the male- dominated society:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise. (Angelou, 2-4)

In this stanza, Maya Angelou announces that nothing and no one could pull her down from her success. She didn't care about the history books, because she knows that it is filled with twisted lies. If someone tries to squish her or trod her in any way, like 'dust' she continues to rise above all these hindrances. She will rise from everything. She doesn't care what the world thinks of her. She lives in her own norms to achieve her dream.

In the second stanza, she speaks about the confidence and the self- esteem she possesses. Angelou asks if her 'sassiness', being lively and bold is upsetting. She observes that people around her 'beset' with gloom when she succeeds. She compares herself with the 'moon' and the 'sun' as they are affected by the tides. The society might keep her oppressed but it is in her nature to rise up and stand against oppression just as it is the nature of the tides to respond to moon and rise. This shows her firm determination to rise against challenges like phoenix. Like hopes that spring high, she also rises high, and she will spring above all the negatives and from the oppressing people. She then directly questions those who have tried to oppress her:

"Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?" (Angelou, 13-14)



She very well knows that her success is received with bitterness by the racist people in her society. She uses specific phrases like "broken," "weakened," "teardrop," "cries," and "soulful" to denote that someone despises her and wants her not to succeed in life. The unfavourable phrases and anxious bodily gestures, such as "bowed head," "lowered eyes," and "shoulders falling down" indicates unkind attitudes, behaviours, or feelings. But she persisted in her attempts to succeeded. She then continues to talk about the attitude she actually has and the confidence she has developed despite all the difficulties and the true nature of her persona. She asserts,

“Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise.” (Angelou, 29-32)

This suggests that she stands for her rights to be free and tries to bring a change into the out casted black marginalized women. Though their history may be full of pain and shame, they may be oppressed profoundly, remembering such past is full of agony, but that won't let her down. That will rather inspire her to succeed in life.

She, then, introduces herself as ‘black ocean’, holding in all the ‘shame’ and ‘pain’ of her race and her gender within her tide. She reveals that she aims to leave behind all the oppression and trauma with intent to rise above it. ‘Into a daybreak’ at the end of the poem is suggestive of her determination and her strength and power to survive. The thrice repetition of the phrase ‘I rise’ at the end of the poem indicates her firm determination that she is unstoppable and that she will continue to rise against all odds and adversities.

The "I" in the poem *Still I Rise* stands for black women. In this poetry, Maya Angelou talks about perseverance of black women in the face of discrimination. This poem is not only a proclamation of her own determination to rise above society, but was also a call to others to live above the society in which they were brought up. Through the poem, she suggests the readers how race, culture, religion and beliefs overpower the discrimination faced by black women. The poem is a critique on anti- black racism and kindles a beacon of hope for the oppressed and downtrodden women. Through this poem she not only proclaims of her self- confidence and resilience, but also gives a clarion call to others to rise and to fight the injustice and discrimination in the world.

Discussion

Sylvia Plath and Maya Angelou are two eminent poets, who lived in entirely different times, culture and life experiences. Both of them have an opposite style of writing. Yet, the common thing between them is the power of their words. Both the poets have carved their niche as women activists in the literary world by addressing the gender



discrimination in terms of their personal experiences. But the difference in the way of addressing the issues are clearly visible in their poetry. Even though both the poet favors feminism, they differ in approaching the same. Their works depict the sufferings faced by women in every corner of life. Through their problems, they portray how in general woman suffer to establish her identity to come out of the set norms compelled by the society.

Plath evoke the image of a field of mushrooms that grow silently overnight, undetected and unnoticed, almost like a silent rebellion at the end of which they will rule the world. In contrast, Maya Angelou in *Still I Rise* believes that she need not be silent about herself, but arrogantly flaunts her strength.

The tones of each poem are a very different. The tone in *Mushrooms* is more unconfident and subservient. Someone who depends on another 's approval. The tone in *Still I Rise* is that of a confident and strong coloured woman. One can sense both of those things and see it so clearly. She doesn't need anyone to be herself.

Plath portrays the mushrooms as a unit, as though they are all bound together by their cause, and to back this up she talks in the first person plural: "Nobody sees us, Stops us, betrays us" This enhances the image of a silent group all working in solidarity to overthrow the oppressive regime. In contrast, *Still I Rise* is an entirely solitary being, that feels no need for any companions. Angelou, similarly to Plath, speaks entirely in the first person singular.

Though Maya and Sylvia treat the same theme using the same approach, both of them differs in shaping the poem with the feministic tool. Maya mix up the anti-black racist images along with feministic whereas Sylvia follows the main stream of feminism. Both the poets strive for the liberty of women in general. Maya Angelou inspires the whole society and women together by bringing positive vibrancies through her words. Sylvia Plath, on the other hand, represents the women of her society by being a representative to portray the sufferings.

Plath describes women as meek as mushrooms and they will come into the power that they deserve as they have already faced and come out of the night of struggle. On the other hand, Angelou describes herself as a strong individual who is ready to face any challenges and obstacles and is determined to rise against all odds.

Conclusion

In both the poems, the personal emotions and experiences are reflected. Angelou asserts her thoughts in a calm and steady yet proud and firm manner. Her poem is an assertion of the dignity and resilience of marginalized people (particularly women) in the face of



oppression. In *Mushrooms*, Plath indicates that the female power lies in being united and foreshadows the uprising of women and encourages women to unite to form a common voice. In *Still I Rise*, Angelou talks about individual oppression and rise above all the adversities and assert her individual identity. Whereas Plath shows female power in unity and solidarity. The poem raises an objection against the male oppression of women. It indicates the uprising of women. It is considered as a shout of anger in the face of oppression. Plath threatens her enemy with having a great number of female fighters “So many of us!” (Hughes, 1982: 139).

Both the poems ensue a sense of hope and resilience. Through their poems Angelou and Plath offer deep reflections and pose thought provoking questions to their readers. Both champion womanhood and rising above tyrannies. Both poems insist on the power and endurance of feminine spirit.

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