

## **Text and Context: A Comparative Reading of the Select Poems of Maya Angelou and Imtiaz Dharker**

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**Abstract:** *The present scenario of world literature incorporates itself in the regional variety of its makers. As part of globalization the whole world has shrunken into one, and as a result each country has extended her hands to donate and to receive what she termed as her own, like, language, culture, heritage, literature and so on. Consequently the magnitude of comparative literature in this era is astounding. All writers use signs and symbols that pass through their minds, and these signs and symbols are expressed along with their regional or national cultures. The paper aims at introducing two well known female poets from two sections of the world. Maya Angelou is a black writer who lived among the whites and tasted the bitter fruits of segregation. Her poems and autobiographies shout at the unending suffering that they have experienced. The second writer, Imtiaz Dharker born in Lahore, writes about gender politics, communal conflicts and geographical and cultural displacement of people. She deals with the various aspects of the lives of Muslim women and records the injustice, oppression and violence to which they are subjected under the cover of 'Purdha'. These two authors become the spoke women against the age old oppressions suffered by 'the second sex'. They redeem the socio-cultural setbacks of their country through their writings.*

**Key words:** *comparative- analogy-textual signs- contextual symbols-redemption*

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### **I. Introduction**

Literary texts have been framed by writers of diverse socio-cultural, political and religious milieu. The writings are the reflections of the ruminating experiences they have undergone. The present scenario of world literature incorporates itself in the regional variety of its makers. As part of globalization the whole world has shrunken into one, and as a result each country has extended her hands to donate and to receive what she termed as her own, like, language, culture, heritage, literature and so on. All writers use signs and symbols that pass through their minds, and these signs and symbols are expressed along with their regional or national cultures.

The metamorphosis of writers from upper to lower and from man to woman, gave rampant transformation in the realm of literature. The world had witnessed female writers who were forced to bear a male pen name to ventilate to the public. There were writers who became the killers of their own 'crops' of the fear of the uncouth society. Why do these writers use the medium of literature to voice out their issues?

The two poets selected for the present writing are Maya Angelou and Imtiaz Dharker. These authors, being women, share same mental agony from the public, but on the other hand they represent two cultures and therefore there are differences in their experiences too. It is purely a comparative study, not an analogy, as comparative literature deals with the study of literature beyond the confined of one particular country. Maya Angelou and Imtiaz Dharker wrote poems from their bitter experiences; their writings are the sweat of disappointed memories.

Maya Angelou, the renowned American writer, a highly revered spokesperson for the Blacks, was born in Saint Louis. When her parents separated, she went to live with her grandmother in Stamps. Growing up in Stamps, Angelou felt the profundity of the agony and anguish of growing up in a White-centered world. Afro-Americans were then a racially segregated society cut off from the White mainstream. She had a personal encounter with the evil of racism when she was refused to be cared by a White dentist, similar to the experience of Wole Soyinka when he attempted to get a boarding in a hotel. At the age of eight, she was raped by her mother's boy friend, who was later killed by her uncles. Traumatized by the turn of events, she fell silent for five years. She would not communicate with anyone, but spent her whole time reading books. Encouraged by her grandmother and her loving neighbours, she developed a great love for language and by reciting literature, regained her will to speak and after wards she decided to fight against racism, sexism and poverty. She was determined not to be bowed down by the initial setbacks in her life.

Maya Angelou in her poem Still I Rise speaks for the blacks who are struggling hard to rise from the evilness of White supremacy. The white supremacy, in its desire for hegemony and power, has distorted and disfigured the history of the blacks by mass propaganda campaigns based on myths that hide Black people from

themselves and their greatness. They are heavily misrepresented, characterized as inherently barbaric, corrupt, intolerant and lazy savages. The oppressed are whipped to labour and are humiliated after they have finished.

Still *I Rise* by Angelou is a celebration of the spirit of the Blacks. Like any other group in the US, perhaps even more than any other group, the Blacks had contributed for the prosperity of the nation but their contributions were ignored by the Whites, distorting history. The mass media propagates myths and untruths about the work ethics and the sexual ferocity of the Black male. The Black family is depicted as morally lax. The parents are shown as unskilled, irresponsible and careless in bringing up their children. She invokes the thoughts of her people by enlightening that it is high time that they have to rise up like the phoenix bird rises from the ashes. She says:

You may write me down in history

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pumping in my living room.

(Angelou1-8)

In her view the Whites are unhappy because they see the Black people walk like rich people as if they have oil wells and gold mines in their backyard, and wealth is flowing in. The Whites want to see the Blacks broken with bowed head and lowered eyes, falling shoulders and always crying. So, when they see the Blacks bright and happy they are unhappy. Angelou exhorts the Blacks to come out of their shame and walk with their heads up. They should feel proud that they are Blacks. Colour has nothing to do with character. She personifies herself as dust and air to rise freely. She calls herself as a black ocean spreading all over the world, bearing the rise and fall of the tide. She speaks:

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

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I rise.

(33-43)

In her second poem, *Caged Bird*, Maya Angelou depicts the oppression suffered by the blacks and the freedom enjoyed by the whites marvelously. With her contrasting imageries of a caged bird and a free bird she depicts the forlorn feeling of a black. She visualizes that the whites are benefitted only because they own something: colour, power, wealth and so on. The Blacks are barred from all kinds of pleasures as they are dark skinned, poor and they are under the Whites feet, always submissive. According to her the free bird is blessed with the space without any boundaries, it inhales fresh air and it can dip its wings in to the orange water from where the sun kisses the ocean. In contrast to this free set up, Maya Angelou portrays the miserable situation of the Blacks like this:

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage

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so he opens his throat to sing

(Angelou 8-14)

She says that the song of the caged bird is heard on the distant hill because it is not a joyous song, but a cry from the deep heart yearning for freedom. As the poem progresses, the author sees the broad and extensive world of splendour of the Whites and the narrow, grave like space of the screams of the Blacks in vivid diction and thought. She says:

The free bird thinks of another breeze

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and he names the sky his own.

(23-26)

On the other hand the Blacks have a tough time:

but a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams

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so he opens his throat to sing.

( 27-30)

Thus Maya Angelou speaks for the Afro-Americans or in a way for the whole slaves of the world. She unfolds the false myths and notions related to the meanness of the blacks and she makes them feel that they are not inhuman or subhuman creatures. Just like Maya Angelou who speaks for the low race, Imtiaz Dharker speaks for the low gender. Born in Lahore in Pakistan and brought up in Glasgow, Scotland, Imtiaz Dharker belongs to that generation of poets who bridged the great treasures of poetry after independence. She regards herself as a Scottish Calvinist Muslim and her poetry is a confluence of three cultures. She handles issues of social, cultural and religious significance with her tender and delicate presentation. She awakens us to the wrongs thongs of the daily life of women under the norms, rules and regulations laid down by the patriarchal society for power dynamics. She points out the follies and foibles of the society, particularly in Islam, such as dowry system, purdha, male chauvinism and so on.

In her poem *Another Woman* Dharker voices her humanistic and feministic concerns at the ever-increasing number of bride burnings and dowry deaths taking place in the country. Dowry is a social evil that has brought pain and misery to many families. Many lives have been lost because of this hideous monster that

seems to have taken a permanent place in our culture. The youths of today have a greater role to play in extirpating this evil from our midst. A girl is not a commodity for sale and a boy is not a commodity to be acquired by the highest bidder.

Another Woman by Imtiaz Dharker gives expression to many such gender issues. According to her many Indian brides either burn themselves or are burned in the name of dowry. Statistics show that 80% of the bank loans availed by the poor in India are to meet the wedding costs and dowry demands. Another issue is malnutrition. For the woman in the poem even a white radish is an extravagance. She can only dream its crunch between her teeth and its sweet sharp taste. Then we see the issue of the rights of women. The woman in the poem does not even have the right to speak to her husband. She has no space of her own and she has to spend her time sitting in the kitchen amidst the heat and fumes. It is a shame that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, woman is just a commodity to be bought and sold in the marriage market and ill-treated at home. She gives a typical portrait of a woman in the kitchen:

..... Cut an onion, fine, and cooked

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shielding her face from the heat.

(Dharker: 14-18)

Imtiaz Dharker presents the submissive role of a wife who is always forced to watch the 'flame hiss up and beat against the cheap old pot'. She presents the pathetic picture of a woman in her husband's house:

She crouched, as usual, on the floor

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to speak.

(Dharker: 24-31)

The docility of women and their silence provoked men to ask for dowry. Even though we have rules and regulations regarding this evil, the death rates are increasing day by day. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 prescribes the following penalty for giving or taking dowry:

If any person, after the commencement of this Act, gives or takes or abets the giving or taking of dowry, he shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than five years, and with the fine which shall not be less than fifteen thousand rupees or the amount of the value of such dowry, whichever is more.

In spite of the promulgation of this Act and the several modifications thereafter, the evil practice continues to contribute to the escalating wedding expenses, and the rise in dowry-related killings and suicides. The woman in the poem too finally consoles by burning herself. The poet says:

So when the kerosene was thrown

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that she had ever known

(39-43)

It was a brilliant spark of an idea to escape from her hellish existence to the heaven of freedom where no torturing hands would hold her in submission. The woman finds herself unfit in the social structure of patriarchy.

The silence of women is also accompanied by the invisibility that patriarchy prescribes for women, and it often misinterprets scriptures and religious texts to justify these atrocities. Patriarchy often wears the cloak of religiosity to dominate women, and women internalize these false assumptions to become willing participants in their own oppression. In her most famous poem Purdah 1 she deals with her aversion to religiosity. Islam introduces a lot of restrictions to both man and woman as part of its rituals. But the man insists constantly on the duties of female alone, forgetting that he is also bound to answer the questions of god after death. Purdah 1 is a judicious protest and an expressive criticism of the tradition of veil strictly imposed on Muslim women. The life of a Muslim girl gets a turning point when she suddenly becomes conscious of her sexual growth, others are perhaps more conscious.

One day they said

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the body finds a place to hide

(1-5)

The society, which is made up of man alone, cautious and conscious, will teach her some manners, decorum and dignity for the woman in the purdah. People around here are the same; their looks are changed with a purpose. They notice her shame but purdah is a protection against the vile looks of the people. Imtiaz sees Purdah as suppressive and deadening to the intellectual growth of a woman and it tarnishes her personality. Purdah becomes a symbol of seclusion and alienation from the society. Imtiaz Dharker uses her sharp tongue to make us feel that the boundaries of women are the creations of male dominated society. With their sly looks, men forced females to shrink into their cocoons. The man made woman senses the ugliness of their uncovered body and thereby enforced them to generate echoing thoughts about their body. The poet shows the struggle of a woman to escape from 'the inching past', that she carries wherever she goes. And finally she concludes her poems by revealing the darkness in front of her, not giving any ray of hope.

Passing constantly out of her own hands

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inward

(33-37)

Maya Angelou and Imtiaz Dharker gave life and breath to their writings by chiseling their personal experiences. The former being an Afro-American, speaks about the trauma faced by the Black race in a country where the White race is the hegemonic power. In America the Blacks are referred to as the weaker race and therefore they are relegated to the margins. It took centuries for the writers to come on the stage and to sing for the uncivilized mob. On the other hand Imtiaz Dharker was born in a country where women were marginalized and men used the draperies of religion to suppress females. There she finds that the domination of male community acts as the centre and the female among them are drawn to the background. The race and religion are equally venomous and therefore dangerous, if they are used for exploiting the 'have-nots', as these two are the constructs of the society.

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