

"I'll rise": A Portrait of Hope in Maya Angelou's Poetry

Dr. Heba Maher Attia Hashim

Lecturer in English Literature
Department of English, Faculty of Arts, New Valley University,
Egypt.

Assistant Professor of English Literature
Department of Languages and Translation, Faculty of Education and
Arts,
University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

This paper seeks to indicate how hope is revealed in the poetry of Maya Angelou. The paper opens with a brief introduction about Angelou, the variety of her literary production, the position she achieved as an influential African American writer, and the role she assigned to herself as a spokesperson for blacks, women, and the oppressed everywhere. For the paper's theoretical framework, the researcher draws on the Civil Rights Movement in America, its leading figures, and the part played by Angelou in it. Then, poems from various poetry collections written by Angelou are thoroughly analyzed to show how these poems reveal hope. A technical discussion usually follows the thematic explanation of poems to indicate how Angelou's poetic techniques are skillfully employed to reflect hope in her poetry.

Keywords: African American literature, hope, Maya Angelou, poetry

Introduction

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

— (Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems* 163)¹

Well-known for her autobiographical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Angelou is a widely respected African American poet, novelist, playwright, memoirist, editor, historian, essayist, and civil rights activist. She was born in 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, and raised in Stamps, Arkansas, where she experienced the pain of oppression and witnessed how brutal racial discrimination might be. Yet, despite the numerous difficulties she encountered in her life, Angelou has been keen to make her poetry an oasis of hope, not only for herself or for her black people but also for all the desperate and distressed all over the globe.

A versatile author, Angelou wrote several collections of poetry, essays, novels, plays, and children's books. She is an authentic author whose writings celebrate the black experience, portray the pains and hopes of the blacks, and present a strong voice of liberty, justice, equality, and determination. Accordingly, she can assert herself as a spokesperson for the oppressed categories of society everywhere: blacks, women, minorities, and others. In spite of the ugly ghost of racism that stood as a barrier in her way of personal and literary

¹ Angelou, Maya. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, 1st ed. New York: Random House, 1994. [All poems by Maya Angelou in this paper are from this edition and hereafter cited between square brackets as page numbers only.]

development, and the attempts of a male-dominated white society to silence her and hinder her aspirations just because she was female and black, she never gave up and never lost hope to attain what she had yearned for.

Angelou and the Civil Rights Movement

Through her writings, Angelou adopted a firm attitude that called for justice and freedom for the African Americans in the United States who suffered oppression and discrimination in American society. Hers was a powerful literary voice calling for equal standards to govern the relationship between Blacks and Whites. However, the enthusiastic writer found that more was needed to defend the cause of her fellow African American people. Accordingly, she decided to have an explicitly political role in the struggle by participating in the Civil Rights Movement that was established in the United States to stand against racial segregation in society.

The Civil Rights Movement was mainly a struggle of the blacks in America to get equal rights and social justice in society. Political in nature and social in purpose, the movement took place during the mid-twentieth century, precisely from 1954 to 1968. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and W.E.B. Du Bois were the most prominent figures of the movement. It was during the fifties that two incidents took place and paved the way for the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. The first incident occurred when the lawyers of the famous National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) succeeded in making the Supreme Court issue a decision stating that public school segregation "was unconstitutional" (Levy 6). The second incident took place in Alabama where Rosa Parks, an African

American activist and NAACP member whose courage inflamed the struggle between Blacks and Whites, and led to the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. As Karson narrates,

Rosa Parks created the spark that would provide the momentum for the entire civil rights movement. On December 1, 1955, the NAACP member boarded a public bus and took a seat in the "Negro" section in the back of the bus. Later, Parks refused to relinquish her seat to a white passenger, defying the law by which blacks were required to give up their seats to white passengers when the front section, reserved for whites, was filled. Parks was immediately arrested. (14)

Those two incidents stirred the enthusiasm of black Americans, urged them to continue their struggle against bigotry, and, more importantly, gave them a chance to direct public opinion toward the nobleness of the cause they were fighting for. Thus, the blacks achieved continuous victories. For example, the 1957 Civil Rights Act was approved by Congress, asserting the right of black Americans to participate in voting. Another achievement was joining the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to the Civil Rights Movement. The former was formed in 1957 under the leadership of Martin Luther King, and the latter was established in 1960 by a group of African American university students. Such organizations encouraged protests everywhere in the United States and directed the public attention to the fair demands of the black Americans.

Significant in the history of the Civil Rights Movement was the March to Washington, a mass gathering on the American capital, organized by Civil Rights activists and led by Martin Luther King. The demonstration, being the largest in American history, included black and white people together and took place on the twenty eighth of August, 1963 when King gave his famous speech 'I Have a Dream,' highlighting the protesters' demands for justice and equality:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama . . . will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today. (qtd. in Karson 18)

Angelou had a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement. She worked with both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. In 1959, King offered her to be the northern coordinator of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) which he was leading, and she happily accepted the offer, feeling enthusiastic and proud to work with such a great figure. An active member of the Civil Rights Movement, Angelou went to Cairo in 1960 and worked as the editor of the *Arab Observer* (Neubauer 127). In Egypt, she could present the cause of black people in hopes of getting the support of Arab countries. In 1964, she travelled to Ghana where she became the editor of the

African Review that was issued from Accra. "In Ghana," Souheyla Tefiani writes, "she worked as the assistant administrator of the school of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana and...met there some of the most influential people of her life, like W.E.B. Du Bois, Julian Mayfield, and Malcolm X" (22-23).

In fact, Angelou's participation in the Civil Rights Movement was characterized by "devoting herself to help liberate black Americans and to spread out freedom and equality all over the world as her unique voice was heard worldwide" (Tefiani 24). She was an inspiring figure not only for black people but also for humankind in general. As a sign of respect and appreciation, American President Barak Obama awarded Angelou the 2010 Presidential Medal of Freedom, "the nation's highest civilian honor" in America (Kopko et al. 156).

Hope in Angelou's Poetry

Through her journey as a black woman and poet, Angelou "rose and transformed herself from a mere person," Shrestha and Chamling point out, "to an idea – hope that lives on even after years of her demise and will live on" (188). A careful reading of her poetry indicates that it accurately depicts the hardships and sufferings of blacks in American society and, at the same time, paints a portrait of hope that provides a sense of survival, defies injustice, opposes class discrimination, and instills self-confidence in weary souls.

For Angelou, hope is usually connected to determination and self-assurance. This connection is noted in 'Still I Rise', a poem from the collection *And Still I Rise* (1978). In the poem, Angelou confidently addresses her oppressors who insist on imprisoning her in the cage of

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racism and attempt to kill life in her adventurous soul. She addresses them,

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise. [163]

Sticking to the inner hope that always empowers her and lights the darkness of her way, the speaker challenges oppression and resists racial prejudice. The lines are a clear and hopeful announcement that she will not permit the 'hatefulness' of her oppressors to hold her back or hinder her endeavour to assert herself as a black woman and writer. Despite their hurtful 'words', fierce looks, and upsetting dreadfulness, she will 'rise' up and achieve her aspirations.

Remarkably, the stanza is characterized by highly expressive poetic techniques that the poet cleverly uses to reflect the theme of the lines. For example, the simile in the last line of the above stanza reveals the vast scope of the speaker's ability to 'rise' and resume her way. Here, she compares herself to 'air,' which her oppressors have no control over, as if she likes to tell those who seek her fall that she is out of reach. Accordingly, they cannot hamper her aptitude to grow and bloom continuously. Apostrophe is also noticed in the first three lines as the poet addresses her oppressors as 'you', affirming that they are the actual agents of oppression and racial discrimination. Furthermore, the repetition of the phrase 'you may' at the start of the first three lines in a successive way gives an instance of anaphora. Common in both prose and verse, anaphora is "a rhetorical figure of repetition in which the same word or phrase is repeated in (and usually at the beginning of) successive lines, clauses, or sentences (Baldick

14). In the example given here, the phrase 'you may' is successively repeated, emphasizing the probability that the oppressors may take brutal actions such as shooting, cutting, or killing to dominate the speaker and suppress her free will.

A fourth technical issue is the clever use of pronouns in the lines. Throughout the stanza, subject pronouns and object pronouns are used evocatively. For instance, at the beginning of the first three lines, 'you' is employed as a subject pronoun that directly refers to the doer, namely 'the oppressors who brutally attempt to 'shoot', 'cut', and 'kill' the speaker. The use of these active verbs stresses the aggressive practices against the speaker. On the other hand, the object pronoun 'me' is similarly repeated in the same three lines, referring to the speaker who is represented in the lines as an object, a victim in the face of brutal oppression. However, the object pronoun turns into a subject pronoun 'I' in the last line, giving the impression that it is conclusions that matter, and conveying the meaning that despite all these forms of cruelty, the speaker will finally triumph, as she proudly states, 'I'll rise', maintaining her assured capacity to go on and continue her journey towards hope, liberty and self-actualization regardless of what her oppressors 'may' try to do.

Angelou concludes 'Still I'll Rise' by pointing her oppressors out that 'the hope' she has, 'the dream' she embraces, and the rebellious spirit she possesses are the product of long days and 'nights' of pain and suffering undergone by her and her African 'ancestors'. As she maintains,

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

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I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise. [164]

The lines are full of hope and affirmation that the speaker will rise up, taking her insightful power from a past characterized by 'terror' and fear'. It is those former times of agony and endurance that have given her and her oppressed black Americans the motive to receive a shining morning that 'wondrously' promises them happiness and freedom. Proud of the great heritage of her forefathers, she feels confident and optimistic to speak on behalf of her enslaved black people and become the incarnation of their dreams and hopes. For all these reasons, she will 'rise' and never give up this noble dream that increasingly grows inside her heart and soul. The repetition of the word 'rise' five times in the above stanza reveals this meaning and emphasizes it. In addition, the enjambment in the first five lines reflects the speaker's strong will to leave 'behind' the bitter taste of anguish that she and her people experienced in a cruel past full of 'terror' and fear' and *quickly* 'rise / Into a daybreak' that shines with hope, joy, serenity, and grace inherited from the forebears.

Similarly, the tone of hope and courage is also heard in 'Equality', a poem included in the collection *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990). In the poem, Angelou directs her speech to a prejudiced white society whose members lack the standards of 'equality' in their treatment of black Americans. She 'boldly' faces them, stating:

You declare you see me dimly

through a glass which will not shine,
though I stand before you boldly,
trim in rank and marking time. [232]

The lines show the speaker in a stance of challenge of her white oppressors who always belittle her and ignore the presence of her black people in society. The speaker courageously confronts them, elucidating that they recognize her as something pale and faint that cannot 'shine' or reflect itself through the glass. However, she can 'boldly' express herself and elegantly stand for her black American people, communicating their pains and hopes. The poet indicates how white people see blacks as worthless and insignificant, overlook them, and demean their contributions in society. Angelou describes this unfair action taken by white people as a kind of injustice and narrow-mindedness. It is this same shortsightedness of those in power that makes them unable to clearly see and understand the full picture of the African American cause. That's why she advises them, later in the poem, to "take the blinders from [their] vision" and "the padding from [their] ears" [232] so that they can see and hear, and therefore know the truth of the African American struggle. For the speaker, those white people are discriminatory in their attitude. Hence, their prejudice and inequality make them unable to acknowledge the real nature and worth of black Americans. As a representative of those blacks whom the white people unjustly degrade, the poet 'stand[s] before [her oppressors] boldly, / trim in rank and marking time', expressing her strong belief in herself, her gender, and her race.

Figurative language adds beauty to the above stanza and enriches its meaning. For example, metaphor is expressively used in the second line to convey the idea posed by the poet. Black Americans

are compared to dim or dark glass that does not 'shine' or reflect anything. For a bigoted white culture, blacks have no ability to shine, reflect any worth, or contribute any benefit to the community. They are useless and have nothing bright in their lives. This is how white Americans recognize black people, a shortsighted perspective that explains the unfair treatment and racial attitude taken against black Americans in society.

Continuing her rejection of the degradation practiced against African Americans and affirming deep respect for her black people, Angelou reminds white Americans who claim that they find no worth in blacks how African-Americans have struggled hard to lead their lives in a white society whose myths "promise justice for all but only guarantee freedom for a few," to quote Carol Neubauer (132). Angelou mentions:

We have lived a painful history,
we know the shameful past,
but I keep on marching forward,
and you keep on coming last. [232]

Noticeably, the first-person subject pronoun 'I', used in the previous stanza to refer to Angelou herself, has turned in this stanza into 'we' to signify African Americans in general. As the lines indicate, the speaker explains to her oppressors how her people suffered a lot through 'a painful history' and a 'shameful past' marked with oppression and racial discrimination. Nevertheless, they could patiently endure agonies, overcome miseries, challenge frustrating conditions, and firmly stick to undefeated hope. Again, the first-person subject pronoun changes in the third line from 'we' to 'I' as the speaker refers to herself as an example of the lead achieved by her black people. She points out that

despite the harsh conditions that she and her ancestors experienced, she is always in the forefront, while her oppressor comes in the back. This is because she calls for justice, whereas they advocate injustice; she has faith in equality, but they believe in inequality. Those who adhere to noble values are always in the front position.

The shift between 'I' and 'we' as first-person subject pronouns throughout the poem is expertly employed by Angelou to reveal the idea of the lines and convey the message of the poet. This shift reveals the integration and continuity of black American generations. The glory created by the forefathers in the past is the real source of empowerment for the descendants in the present. The speaker in the poem feels confident and proud of herself because of the insightful hope and inspiring strength she inherited from her forebears. It is those 'gifts' of the 'ancestors' that have made her 'keep on marching forward' whereas her oppressors 'keep on coming last'.

Hope breaks the chains of bigotry and racism. This is the message of Angelou's 'Caged Bird', a poem from the volume *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (1983). The poet writes:

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. [194].

Armed with self-confidence, pride in the heritage of the ancestors, and trust in their own capacities, black Americans, though imprisoned in the cage of racial discrimination, have never given up their dream of freedom. Their hope in liberation and self-assurance has never faded. This is what Angelou asserts in the poem. As the above lines reveal, the poet compares herself to a locked-up bird that enthusiastically yearns to get out of the cage in order to celebrate life happily and embrace the sky freely. Motivated by the hope that runs through his soul and the strong will that grows inside his heart, the caged bird daringly "opens his throat to sing" though "his wings are clipped and / his feet are tied," Angelou tells us later in the poem [195].

It is that heavy burden of captivity and confinement that makes the singing voice of the caged bird 'fearful' and trembling as if it is not used to singing and celebration amidst such a repressive environment that continuously attempts to suffocate its dream for release and free will. Nevertheless, it has dared to challenge repression and fill the place with his melodies; because the caged bird 'sings of freedom', the hope and dream of all the oppressed, 'his tune is heard' everywhere, even 'on the distant hill'. Personification is noted throughout the stanza, as the poet personifies the caged bird as a human being who can sing and express his eagerness for release and freedom. The caged bird not only stands for Angelou but also for all the oppressed everywhere, depicting their dilemma of imprisonment and giving voice to their yearning for liberty and self-assertion.

Like Martin Luther King who was generally regarded as a source of hope and inspiration for all blacks in America, Angelou had the dream that black Americans could lead a life based on love, respect, and equality, a life free of oppression, exploitation, and discrimination.

In response to the dream of King that the children of the African American people "will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin" (qtd. in Karson 18), Angelou addresses the same issue in her poetry, asserting that the dream is also hers; she proudly sees herself as "the dream and the hope of the slave," to quote her collection *And Still I Rise* [164]. Moreover, she maintains this in her poem *On the Pulse of Morning*, published in 1993. The poem's title reflects hope and cheerfulness, inviting everyone in society to receive the new day that shines with love and acceptance for all. Angelou writes:

Lift up your eyes
Upon this day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.

Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands,
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts. [272]

As shown above, the poet asks 'women, children, and men' to 'lift up' their 'eyes' and 'hearts' to embrace hope and receive the dream – the dream of dignity, justice, and freedom. The lines stand as a glimpse of hope and a comprehensive invitation to all people inside and outside the United States to follow their 'dream' and pursue their eagerness for a better future characterized by equality, love, and the acceptance of the other.

Apostrophe is observed in the above stanza and throughout the poem as a whole, as if Angelou likes to capture the attention of her hearers and readers whether they are females, males, or even children that each of them is intended by her words, saying to everyone: get ready for 'this day breaking for you'. It is also noted that the stanza opens with 'Lift up your eyes' and concludes with 'Lift up your hearts'. The speaker's addressees are first required to open their 'eyes' in order to see the new day shining for them. Once they do this and receive the bright daybreak at the beginning, they can then feel, by their 'hearts,' the beauty of the blessings waiting for them at the end. It is worth mentioning that *On the Pulse of Morning* was the poem which Angelou recited during the inauguration of President Clinton in 1993. Spreading hope everywhere, the poem concludes as follows:

Here, on the pulse of this new day,
You may have the grace to look up and
out
And into your sister's eyes,
And into your brother's face,
Your country,
And say simply
Very simply
With hope—
Good morning. [273]

For Angelou, hope can spring from the heart of grief. Her poem 'When Great Trees Fall', published in her poetry collection *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990), reveals this idea and asserts it. The poem was read

by Angelou at the funeral of her close friend, the writer and Civil Rights Activist James Baldwin. Angelou mentions:

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety. [266]

The poem expressively compares the death of great figures like Baldwin to the fall of great trees in the forest. "Just as those massive trees shake the earth and make animals crouch in confusion and fear," one reads, "the loss of great individuals sends shockwaves" that fill our hearts with grief and agony (Mottram). When giant trees fall and collapse in the woods, stones quiver in sadness; lions are shown crouching in shock and bewilderment; and elephants are seen moving from one place to another in confusion and clumsiness as if looking for shelter after they have lost 'safety'. The atmosphere of balance, protection, and security at the woods has greatly been disturbed due to the sudden 'fall' of 'great trees', the symbol of strength and safety for all species. That the poet depicts the steady rocks shuddering, the daring lions hunkering down, and the large elephants lumbering suggests that the collapse of great trees is really a serious matter to which the forest and its elements have reacted very strongly. Symbolism is clear throughout the stanza. Angelou uses rocks, lions, and elephants as symbols of "assurance, confidence, and protection. Yet, despite their strong energy, the devastating power of death can shake them from head to toe" (Ahondo 152).

Similarly, as the poem reveals, when great people who affect our lives pass away, we feel helpless, powerless, and frustrated. We feel that we have lost the goals we are pursuing and find ourselves wandering aimlessly without a guide to show us the right way. As a result, life becomes empty and meaningless for us. "When great souls die," Angelou writes in the poem, "the air around us becomes / light, rare, sterile" [266]. The loss of such great figures makes our souls "shrink" and our minds "fall away," "Angelou states [267].

However, amidst this flood of pain and distress, grief gives way to hope, relief, and peace of mind. "And when great souls die," Angelou concludes:

after a period peace blooms,^{[L][SEP]}
slowly and always^{[L][SEP]}
irregularly. Spaces fill^{[L][SEP]}
with a kind of^{[L][SEP]}
soothing electric vibration.^{[L][SEP]}
Our senses, restored, never^{[L][SEP]}
to be the same, whisper to us.^{[L][SEP]}
They existed. They existed.^{[L][SEP]}
We can be. Be and be^{[L][SEP]}
better. For they existed. [267]

As 'peace blooms' out of the dignified deaths of those great people, hope emerges, changing the scene and relieving the sad souls. Hope invokes in minds that those great figures, though now dead, have 'existed' to beautify the world and make it a good place for living. Therefore, we begin to recognize the word through the lens of hope, adopting a solid belief that we are all invited to continue the way those

great people started and follow in their footsteps in order to make life more beautiful than they have dreamt. This can be done through believing in ourselves and enhancing love, justice, tolerance, acceptance, and other noble values advocated by those great figures.

At the beginning of the stanza, Angelou gives an example of metaphor in 'peace blooms', comparing peace to a rose that comes into flower, spreading a sense of hope and acceptance, and overcoming the feelings of grief and regret caused by the loss of great people. Another instance of metaphor appears in 'Spaces fill / with a kind of soothing electric vibration'. Here, the poet compares our memory of those great dead people to 'electric vibration' that suddenly shakes us, but hope and peace, with their healing power, provide us with a comforting feeling of serenity and acceptance that soothes us whenever the memory of those great people comes to our minds. These 'soothing' feelings of relief and peacefulness fill up the 'spaces' and emptiness caused by the loss of those great people. Finally, the repetition of the sentence 'they existed' three times in the stanza emphasizes the great influence those noble figures had in our lives. The mere idea that they existed and lived in this world evokes a sense of hope and inspiration as their existence on earth reminds us of their great achievements. Accordingly, it opens a new insight for the present and future generations to carry on and work hard to achieve what they aspire to.

Angelou wrote many poems in honor of great black heroes whose memories inspired hope and enthusiasm in the souls of African American people. In addition to her poem "When Great Trees Fall" which she devoted to James Baldwin as mentioned above, she also wrote 'His Day is Done' in dedication to Nelson Mandela, 'To a Freedom Fighter' in honor of Malcolm X, and 'Abundant Hope' in

commemoration of Martin Luther King. She regarded those leading figures as 'great souls' whose contributions have changed the reality of black people, while she herself is also a great soul that deserves to be honored and commemorated on every page of African American history. Thus, each of these poems that she dedicated to her great black heroes can also be read as an attribute to Angelou herself. One reads,

Presidents and former presidents, writers and musicians, activists and actors, talk-show hosts and ordinary people around the world paid homage to her memory. Large public services were held in Wake Forest, North Carolina, New York City, and San Francisco. Visual images of Angelou circulated in mass media, and her voice, instantly recognizable and resonant, echoed across the airwaves. (qtd. in Ahondo 152)

Conclusion

The present paper sought to explore hope in Maya Angelou's poetry that proudly celebrates the black experience and clearly asserts the poet's quest for justice and human dignity. Armed with hope, self-confidence, and pride in the heritage inherited from her African ancestors, Angelou endeavoured to liberate herself and her black people from the cage of racial discrimination that had previously spoiled the daily life of black Americans. The portrait of hope in her poems is the product of various elements that help this great value appear and take its final shape. Of these elements are determination, self-assurance, courage, the challenge of injustice, speaking on behalf

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of the oppressed, and enhancing the principles of liberty, peace, equity, kindness, respect, and tolerance. More beauty is added to this portrait by the figurative language which Angelou proficiently uses to reflect hope and enrich its meaning in her poems. For Angelou, hope has the power to sprout out from many sources such as remembering the painful history of the blacks, longing for freedom, and yearning for self-assertion. Paradoxically, hope sometimes arises from deep grief and agony. To conclude, Angelou's poetry can be read as a call for hope that promises a better life for people everywhere.

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سوف أنهض": لوحة أمل في شعر مايا أنجلو"

د. هبة ماهر عطيه هاشم

مدرس الأدب الإنجليزي بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة الوادي الجديد، مصر.
أستاذ مساعد الأدب الإنجليزي بقسم اللغات والترجمة، كلية التربية والآداب، جامعة تبوك، السعودية.

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى الكشف عن موضوع الأمل في شعر مايا أنجلو والذي تصوره الشاعرة كلوحة فنية ملهمة تمنح المتحدثة الأنثى ذات البشرة السوداء في قصائدها القوة والمثابرة كلما أنهكتها مصاعب الحياة أو حاول الطغاة فرض سيطرتهم عليها. يبدأ البحث بمقدمة موجزة عن أنجلو وتتوع أعمالها الأدبية، والمكانة المرموقة التي وصلت إليها ككاتبة أمريكية من أصل إفريقي ذاع صيتها بعد نشر سيرتها الذاتية الأولى التي تحمل عنوان أعرف لماذا يغرد الطائر الحبيس. يتناول الإطار النظري للبحث حركة الحقوق المدنية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية والتي كانت تهدف إلى إنهاء التمييز العنصري ضد السود وتحقيق آمالهم المنشودة في المساواة والتحرر، حيث لعبت أنجلو دوراً مميزاً في هذه الحركة السياسية بجوار شخصيات رائدة من الأمريكيين السود مثل مارتين لوتر كينغ ومالكولم إكس وغيرهما. تقوم الباحثة بعد ذلك بعرض وتحليل قصائد متنوعة من دواوين شعرية مختلفة لأنجلو موضحة كيف تبرز هذه القصائد موضوع الأمل وتعكسه بشكل جلي. هذا، وتتميز أنجلو بقدرة فائقة على استخدام أساليب فنية معبرة تؤكد المعنى المقصود وتتناغم، بطريقة سلسلة، مع فكرة الأمل والتفاؤل التي تطرحها الشاعرة في قصائدها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الإفريقي الأمريكي، الأمل، مايا أنجلو، شعر