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Maya Angelou's *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie*: Humanism in Confession

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Literature is a spontaneous flow of life. It is the plaintive account of human heart, crystal as the first sunbeam on the earth, astounding as the universe, stirring as the birth of a first rebel, rational as to be pragmatic; nevertheless, it is as difficult as to be defined in a single word. Ronald and John rightly envisioned, "Literature is as old as human language, and as new as tomorrow's sunrise. And literature is everywhere ... in all the media of communication where a story is told or an image created. It starts with words, and with speech" (2001, 1). It is only the human repercussion that opens a common domain to the all inhabitants of this Globe. It is true that all the writers and the poets of all ages are perpetually conveying their individual passion, their own feelings and experiences, their indigenous culture, their ethnicity or religious ancestry into their works, and remarkably enough, it is literature which reaches every corner of the Earth and makes it a universal human art.

However, the literary excellence as a new art-form is always a fact of new consideration as is the Confessional poetry in English, which has added a new genre into English Poetry along with the emergence of manifold postmodern literary forms. The socio-political environment especially after the Second World War was a matter of big dissatisfaction to the great intellects, across the all continents, including the writers and the poets of all languages. The decade of 50s was the period of big chaos, when this valley of social animals was reverberated by the huge uproar of numerous demands for basic human rights, exclusively for the serious claim of liberty – liberty of land, liberty of self and the liberty of thoughts. A large number of views, dogmas, tenets, isms took their births at this time in poetry as well as literature which swept all the former ideologies away and produced multifarious iconoclastic literary principles which are very complex and ultra-sensory in nature. Probably thence, the sense of individualism gradually rooted into the deeper, which is harvested as today's Confessionalism. The intelligence of the erudite has been sparked up by the imposing awareness of self-analysis, self-defining and self-confession to allure the significance of it, either to reproof their earthly issues or to show the utmost disparagement to the society where they are living.

Although, Poetry is more or less the confession of the poet's own self; yet, the confessional writing is traditionally understood as "a private, autobiographical, and largely uncrafted art form" (Sherwin 144) and now it trends up to be realized as "inescapably encompassing art". Lexically, the very word, 'confession', best means 'admission', 'acknowledgement' and 'revelation'. And undoubtedly, these three are, explicitly or implicitly, the composite structure of writings by all poets and writers. Every piece of writing and each line of rhythms are just the inner feelings of its creator – may be sensitive, transcendental, metaphysical, philosophical, cruel, pathetic or real and so on; precisely, his / her self or autobiographical incorporation. A renowned contemporary Bengali poet, Joy Goswami, has impressively stated, "*Amar jibaddasar moddhe, amar byaktigata jibone abong samasta prithiwi te, emonki prithiwir biere ja kicchu ghotcche sobie amar atmajibonir ansho*" [translated as: Within my lifespan, in my individual life and in this entire planet, even at the outside of this planet; whatever keeps going on are all the part of my autobiography] (Kobita Sangraha, 2011). Remarkably, the great Romantics "spoke directly of their emotions but did not give the game away even to themselves", but today's poetry 'grows apace' with the "most naked kind of confession" (Rosenthal 109). Having discovered the 'mask' removed by the confessional poets unlike the earlier ones, M.L. Rosenthal, in his review *Poetry as Confession on Life Studies* by Robert Lowell, has nicely observed: "to build a great poem out of the predicament and horror of the lost self has been the recurrent effort of the most ambitious poetry of the last century" (113). Eventually, a rebel against the New Critical understanding of poetry, a confessional poet so far openly records his own state of mind and feeling and vision of life. "The motive for confession is penitential or therapeutic – by speaking openly about his guilt and suffering, the poet hopes to make them easier to bear. Another possible motive is ethical: by refusing to join the conspiracy of polite silence around certain shameful subjects, he challenges us to shed light on our own dark places" (Kirsch, 2005).

The Confessional poetry may be the psychic emancipation of a poet who actually represents manifold social and humanitarian issues by revealing own secrets. One of the most famous exponents in the world of Confessional poetry, Maya Angelou, discloses herself in her first volume of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971) like her other anthologies and series of autobiography. Here, she also expresses her pain for loss of love and dignity. She looks to believe people everywhere can have dignity, equality and freedom. She protests for class struggle and racism. Being a Black American she disrobes the traumatic plight of the Black people, they once went through. In this volume of 38 poems, divided into two sections as *Where Love Is a Scream of Anguish* (20 poems) and *Just Before the World Ends* (18 poems), she calls for basic human rights, equality, human value for harmonizing humankind.

Maya Angelou expresses her paining experience of loss and dissatisfaction towards love. In 'They Went Home', she opens up with hatred for those men who are very fond of extra marital affair. They like her sweet straight forwardness. Her sensual appeal attracts them. They are crazy for the physical beauty and wit of the girl with whom they have an illegal relationship. Number of times she tries to tempt the people through her charming personality. But they don't want her as a life partner. Finally they go back to their wives and lie:

They went home and told their wives,
that never once in all their lives,

had they known a girl like me,
But . . . They went home." (CP 7)

Many of her poems like 'Late October', 'When You Come to Me', 'In a Time's', 'A Zorrow Man' bring out Angelou's hatred, pain and sorrow from love. She actually seeks for true love. She wants to go for a fresh start with her boyfriend. But every time being neglected by everyone she feels pain in her soul. She is manipulated and betrayed by her boyfriend through some 'stolen kisses' and 'secret words'. Actually, Maya never gets those things which she wants. We can also find her hatred to lose something or someone special in her poem 'No Loser, No Weeper'. She wants to tell very clearly to a woman to stay away from her 'lover-boy'. By any cost she is not ready to lose her boyfriend:

Now if I felt that way 'bout a watch and a toy,
What you think I feel 'bout my 'lover-boy'?
I ain't threatening you, madam, but he is my evening's joy.
And I mean I really hate to lose something. (CP 12)

Angelou's poems are immediate and intimate, often conveying the certain feeling of desperation, inevitable loss of love, impotence and despair. Through these poems she confesses her urge of love. Her love is pure and human. She searches someone special who may love and take care of her because without love and care no one can survive in this world.

Marguerite Annie Johnson turned Maya Angelou remains ever as a remarkable personality in the history of American brilliance. She was a civil rights activist of 1960s, under the leadership of the great Martin Luther King, Jr. She was an active member of this movement. The horrendous history, the memories of cruel treatment to the Black as slaves by the Whites shake Angelou into her spine as she has recorded into her poem, 'My Guilt'. She feels unfortunate because among all the heroes only she is alive to see the misery of the people. Before seeing the suffering, humiliation of the Black people she wants to die like a true spirit. She often misses the heroes of Civil Rights Movement, like Gabriel, Malcolm, Marcus, Martin Luther King, Jr. and all:

My crime is "heroes, dead and gone,"
dead Vesey, Turner, Gabriel,
dead Malcolm, Marcus, Martin King.
They fought too hard, they loved too
Well.
My crime is I'm alive to tell. (CP 45)

In 'To a Freedom Fighter', Angelou appreciates the great spirit of the fighters who were the active members in the Civil Rights Movement. She can hear the 'moans' and 'breath' of the recently dead soldiers. Angelou speaks of the spirit of the dead soldiers who dedicated their lives for the freedom:

I hear the moans, you die a thousands' death.
When cane straps flog the body
dark and lean, you feel the blow.
I hear it in your breath. (CP 37)

In these poems, Maya Angelou as an active Civil rights activist expresses her deep respect for the heroes and soldiers who had dedicated their lives for the freedom and equality but she is surprised of people's ignorance to their sacrifice. To them, soldiers and heroes, as if, are made for it. Now the people have no excitement in their blood to save their nation, race and even their own dignity. They become cold blooded persons. Angelou believes, if the people understand their role and responsibility towards their nation and race then no soldier and hero will die "a thousands' death".

Angelou comes across with socio-cultural discrimination from racial segregation since her very childhood. The terrific social experience of White- Black discrimination inspired her to write poems on racism. In many of her poems like 'The Calling of Names', 'Harlem Hopscotch', 'On Working White Liberals', she, being an Afro-American, brings out the superior attitude of White folks to the Black ones. For the poor economic background the Black African American cannot socialize everywhere. They are treated as 'Negro' by the White for their skin colour. In every occasion, they are humiliated and get worse treatment by the White. And for this discrimination and racism, the African American people never improve themselves socially, politically, economically and culturally. In 'The Calling of Names', Angelou speaks of those who suffer a lot only for their complexion. Even after migration, the society cannot stop from calling them as 'Negro'. She describes how the White people start calling the African Americans as 'Negro', only for their skin colour:

He went to being called a colored man
after answering to "hey, nigger."
Now that's a big jump,
anyway you figger.
Hey, Baby, watch my smoke.
From colored man to Negro, (CP 46)

In 'Harlem Hopscotch' Angelou throws light on the terrible condition of the Black people of Harlem, a town of America. If the Black people would cross their limit, like the elimination rules of a game, they would have been cast out of the society. The impact of poverty upon their lives is also presented in this poem: 'food is gone, the rent is due'. And for their skin colour they get slave like treatment in their day to day life. Complexion decides their class and living style:

In the air, now both feet down.
Since you black, don't stick around.
Food is gone, the rent is due,
Curse and cry and then jump two. (CP 51)

Like other poems, in 'On Working White Liberals', she also protests for the inequality and discrimination of racism. This poem is about that society where a White person never gives a single chance to a Black people to improve. She wants to make realize about their responsibility towards the humanism above all class, colour and race.

Though there's one thing that I cry for
I believe enough to die for
That is every man's responsibility to man. (CP 47)

Angelou, however, has pointed out the terrific situations of the Blacks in America and how they were atrociously neglected to their democratic and constitutional rights by the Whites in power. In these above poems Angelou demands for freedom and equality of all human kind. She dreams for an egalitarian society where love, peace and equality prevail all through.

However, in this volume of her poetry, Angelou confesses her own tormented experiences in life. Here, she has recorded the time through which she had to grow up into a ‘phenomenal woman’ of love, lust, desire, passion and compassion. She explores the Black history through the autobiographical representation in her poem, and hence, truly to be called “the black woman’s poet laureate”. Her poems are both social and confessional in nature wherein Angelou uses laughter or ridicule instead of tears to cope with minor irritations, sadness, and great suffering. Angelou discloses herself with a tone of liberation ideology, anti-apartheid imploration and an urge of humanity and peace to be prevailed all through in an egalitarian civilization. This volume simply replicates her indomitable spirit reposing human value that strictly defies any racial segregation, injustice and legislative suppression on basic human rights – all she motivates to establish a symbiosis of love, peace and moral value in man, glory of the Creation.

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