

The Pulitzer Trio: Revisiting Works of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker

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The prestigious Pulitzer Prize has an American origin and bestows recognition to works in journalism, literature et al. Awarded in 21 categories, it not just amounts to winning \$10,000 cash and a certificate, but a high standard of recognition conferred by Columbia University in New York City. This prize has a larger role to play. It helps America honour its commitment to democracy.

A significant contribution to American democracy has been recognised by awarding women novelists and poets the Pulitzer honour. I prefer to choose the three women Pulitzer Prize winning writers who are drawn towards each other by the common thread of being African-American with numerous shared and ‘shed’ experiences; they are Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. The “Pulitzer Trio” shed the slough of the traumatic experience of what Fanon calls “a hybridized split existence”, trying to live as two incompatible entities at once. They attempt to negotiate between different identities, between multi-layered value systems (especially being women), and try to challenge racial discrimination and patriarchal subordination. However, as Fanon puts it, though one may assimilate White values and get “white-washed”, you can never be White enough.

Foregrounding the Backgrounds

Maya Angelou, nee Marguerite Johnson, writer, dancer, singer and civil-rights activist, born in April 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri; was the second child of Bailey (a doorkeeper and dietician) and Vivian Baxter (a nurse and realtor). At eight, she was raped by her mother’s boyfriend and left traumatized, not talking for four years. To be voiceless was not unusual for blacks in America then. During this time Maya found respite in

voracious reading. When she tried talking, she did so with elan and eloquence. Her turbulent childhood resulted in promiscuity and she had to face being an unwed mother at sixteen. Come early twenties, and Maya was all together a Creole cook, a street car conductor, a cocktail waitress, a dancer and poet. Dreaming of being a white princess, she refused to speak slang at school or allow herself to be called “nigger”. She was greatly influenced by her grandmother (Momma) and arose with resilience when trapped in a run of bad marriages. She won the Pulitzer for her poetic work ‘/ *Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*’, which is laced with memories of her childhood experiences. America along with the Muses wept on 28 May 2014, when Angelou died at the age of 86.

Toni Morrison was christened Chloe Anthony Wofford in February 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. Her father, George Wofford (a shipyard welder), her mother Ramah Wofford (a housewife), treated their second born of four children with love and care. Graduating from Lorain High School, Toni Morrison attended Horward University, where she majored in English. Earning a Masters degree in English at Cornell in 1955, she returned to Horward to teach English. At Horward, she met and married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect. As the marriage attenuated, she returned to Lorain with her two sons Harold Ford and Slade Kevin. After her divorce, she moved to Syracuse, NY in 1965, where she worked as a textbook editor. In 1989, Morrison accepted the Robert Goheen Professorship in creative writing, women’s studies and African studies at Princeton University, becoming the first Black female to be so honoured by the Ivy League. Her novel *Beloved* won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1988.

Born in February 1944, in a rural town of Georgia to Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Grant, both sharecroppers, Alice Walker grew up amidst the oppressive sharecropping system and racism of the American South. As an eight year old, she was accidentally shot by her brother, and was permanently blind by one eye. Ashamed of her disfigurement, Walker isolated and . drowned herself into reading and writing. She actively involved herself with the African American Civil Rights Movement.

Walker, walked away with the Pulitzer for her novel *The Colour Purple* (1982), which chronicles the struggle of several Black women in rural Georgia in the first half of the twentieth century.

Common and Uncommon Threads

All the three women writers under study grew up in a lower socio-economic background. They faced hard times and grew up amidst discord and suffering. According to Schaffer, children born to parents of a lower socio-economic background defer to their authority, tend to stress obedience, neatness, cleanliness and respect for power — attributes which enable the children to adjust well in blue-collared jobs. In contrast, children of middle class parents... specially professionals, are more likely to stress ambition, curiosity, creativity and independence. (Shaffer⁸²). However, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are exceptions who do not fit this generalisation. This exceptional commonality underscores the authors' intrinsic intellectual ability to be creative writers.

Maya Angelou and Alice Walker faced traumatic experiences of child abuse and even rape. Walker lost her sight (one eye) and was disfigured, while Angelou was raped at the tender age of eight by Mr. Freeman, her mother's paramour. These sorrowful incidents made these women writers withdrawn as children. As unfortunate loners, they sublimated their negative feelings into voracious reading and wrote with power. Morrison and Alice Walker both excelled at school and gave every reason to make themselves feel proud. Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison both changed their names: 'Maya' was an affectionate name given to Ms. Angelou by her brother, and 'Toni' was a name Ms. Morrison accepted for herself as her college mates found 'Chloe' difficult to pronounce. 'Toni' was absorbed from her middle name 'Anthony'.

All the three writers under study were/are single parents. In fact, single parenthood becomes a significant theme in their stories. In Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, the poet makes a constant reference to her discordant childhood and her upbringing by her grandmother, who

was a strong influence in her life raising her up almost like a single parent. It was “Momma” who instilled in her wisdom and shaped her moral values as she grew up into a fine Black woman. In Morrison’s *Beloved*, we see the central Black woman protagonist Sethe, trying hard to be a single parent to her recluse teenager, Denver. Similarly, in Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*, we witness the central character Celie assuming the role of a single parent to her sister Nettie.

Historical, Socio-cultural and Religious Influences

Historically speaking, colonisation had a deep-seated impact on the writers and their works. The work of Black women writers in the post-colonial times contains a vociferous voice which seeks for emancipation and liberation from the shackles of colonial hierarchies and racial and gender discrimination. As Fanon says, “Wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro - his race remains the ineradicable sign of ‘negative difference’ in colonial discourses.” ‘Blacks’ are considered demonic, shabby and licentious. Through their writings, the women writers ask for just treatment, equality and acceptance. Maya Angelou’s *poem I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is an autobiographical account of her struggles as a young lass, left traumatised due to sexual abuse by a Black male family- friend. Toni Morrison *Beloved* and Alice Walker in *The Colour Purple*, explores the experiences and conditions of Black women in a racist and male dominated society.

Culturally speaking, the works under study depict “an impulse towards transcendence”. Rising above one’s humble beginnings, unfortunate experiences and perils is what African American culture are all about. Angelou’s voice in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is coloured with a tinge of superstition which is evident knowing her South African roots. In one of her interviews she remarked: “Naturally, I believed in hants and ghosts and thangs. Having been raised by a super-religious Southern Negro grandmother, it would have been abnormal had I not been superstitious.” (129)

In terms of culture, mysticism has always been associated with African storytelling. The cultural inheritance of black lore mysticism permeates the multilayered fiction of Toni Morrison. The ghost of Beloved, the little daughter that Sethe kills, haunts the novel. Even in film *Beloved*, the tryst with the supernatural is the driving force of the film. Morrison confesses in an interview with Jean Strouse in *Newsweek*: “We were intimate with the supernatural. We were always begging them to repeat the stories that terrified us the most.” (57)

In storytelling, a negative cultural portrayal, however realistic, can cause tempers to flare and can result in furious responses. In Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*, we see how a culturally sensitive readership responds to the mention of “the airing of dirty laundry”. Walker had to face resentment from Blacks (specially men) for her negative portrayal of the Black community in the novel. Walker stood her ground and defended her work which was embedded in realism. She silenced her critics through her autobiography *The Same River Twice - Honouring The Difficult*.

Reading deeply about the religious affiliations of the African-American community, one realises that Black writers reprimand and challenge the Black community to rid itself of the harmful patriarchal symbols representing God[^] that renders God as nothing more than a man of white hair and skin that alternatively, these writers have urged the Black community to replace this male symbolism of God with the image of the ‘Divine in Nature’ - trees, flower, wind and dirt as seen through the eyes of Walker’s female protagonist Sug Avery in *The Colour Purple*.

From Angelou’s, Morrison’s and Walker’s perspectives, there is a mutually recognizable contempt for the “male-humanized God”. Considering the Black enslavement by the Whites, specially men, this perspective can be seen as a reaction to the utter dehumanization of a race exploited and bereft of succour. Derrida, in his condemnation of apartheid in *Racism’s Last Word*, entreats readers to recognise apartheid as ‘a crime against humanity’, ‘the ultimate racism’. Even today, racism flourishes, and there

is a need to resist its advances. In Derrida's words, 'it becomes the atavistic other in a neo-colonialist gesture that once again, albeit unwittingly, disguises colonial imperatives' (Mongia 1997: 58)

Socially speaking, the three writers under study have been activists in their own right, demonstrating respect and concern for others. Maya Angelou was very active in the civil rights era, acting as northern co-ordinator for Martin Luther King Jr's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. An outspoken proponent for women support groups, she viewed the church as a means to reach out to an afflicted community. Alice Walker, likewise, has been a strong voice for the women's movement, the anti-apartheid and the anti-nuclear movements. Toni Morrison has inspired many of her students to take up social causes. Among her students have been poet Amiri Baraka, Andrew Young (former Mayor of Atlanta-Georgia) and Stokely Carmichael (civil rights activist). Morrison also nurtured Black authors such as Angela Davis, Jude Jordan and Wesley Brown.

Revisiting the Trio's Pulitzer Works – *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*(1969) by Maya Angelou

This poem contains the recurrent image of a 'caged bird'-as-the poet eloquently expresses struggle to liberate herself from the shackles of racism and misogyny. This evocative first volume of her six of autobiography, vividly depict Angelou's "tender years" (three to sixteen), during the depression-wrecked 1930's in the American South,. Through this poem, Angelou challenges societal structures, and with the power of wit, powerful language and wisdom, she succeeds in building bridges across divides to heal what has been damaged.

"The caged bird sings
With fearful thrill
Of the things unknown
But longed for still
And his tune is heard

On the distant hill
For the caged bird
Sings of freedom”.

Singing poetry, gave Angelou an absorbing emotional arc which helped her grow from an inferiority complex to confidence, to find the strength to tackle “the puzzle of inequality and hate” through her “honeycomb of determination”. Gifted with linguistic and analytical intelligence, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, with its lilting rhythms, inspires and encourages us to persevere with fortitude in our own challenges with the assured belief that we “shall rise”.

Beloved (1987) by Toni Morrison

This multi layered work was declared the best novel of the past 25 years in 2006. In the words of ‘Charles W. Scheel, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (TMB) is a “traumatic book on the trauma of slavery”; a work of shocking evocations, stunning poetry and bewildering complexity. TMB is studied under various sub-genres: slave narrative, trauma literature, post-colonialism, post-modernism, Gothic and a novel with magic realism. Sethe (the central female protagonist) in *Beloved* articulates her pain and anguish as she battles with the haunting memory of an act of love wherein she kills her daughter in order to save her from slavery. She re-tells her traumatic experiences: her breast milk is stolen, she is beaten by the school teacher’s nephew and has to render sexual favours for engraving her daughter’s tombstone. The marks of slavery carved on her back act as a signification of what she has suffered. “I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running -from nothing.” (15), Sethe tells Paul D.

Beloved here is not just the daughter’s name which haunts in spirit, but as an adjective: it refers to the collective conscious of a race which is so endearing and full of love, despite being victimised. To quote Elaine Scarry, “Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story.” The ‘tobacco tin’ is symbolic of the secretive trauma of slavery

which has replaced Paul D's 'red heart'. Sethe and Paul D. find respite in telling their trauma tales to each other while the spirit of *Beloved* confronts them with a demand for love. This demand is also echoed by Baby Suggs, the ancestral voice which speaks to the congregation of Black men and women to love their bodies which are battered by slavery.

"Love your hands/ love them.... More than your life-holding womb and your life giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (88).

Black feminists hail Toni Morrison for her realistic portrayal of the black women who rise above their adversity and meet the challenges of slavery, racism and patriarchy with stoicism.

***The Colour Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker**

Racial and social violence perpetrated by black men on black women is the theme of this novel which chronicles the struggle of several black women in rural Georgia in the early half of the 20th century. Constantly raped by her step-father, Celie writes letters to God as she has nobody else to turn to. The African American gender oppression reaches its zenith when Celie's father gets her married to a married man (Mr __) with children, leaving her vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence. In 1985, a Steven Spielberg film based on the novel unleashed a volcano of controversy. It incited heated debates about black cultural representations and Walker was dubbed a sexist. However, Black women praised the work 'as 'feminist fable' for its resounding impact on racial and cultural discourses in the United States.

The Colour Purple is a beautiful yet disturbing story about love, hate, yearning and loss. Traumatized physically and emotionally by the Black men in her life, Celie finds love and empathy from other Black women. As she grapples with her trauma and yearns for her lost sister and stolen children, she finds solace in a taboo relationship with her husband's mistress. This novel makes us painfully aware of how the human spirit

can be beaten down unless it wills itself to survive by the sheer grace of God.

Common themes in the works of the Pulitzer Trio

Several common themes can be traced in the works of the three writers under study:

- Facing human tragedy
- Overcoming adversity
- Mysticism
- Black Feminism

In the stories of Angelou, Morrison and Walker, there is a lot of suffering, pain and human tragedy. There are rapes, murders and abuse that traumatise women. Angelou is raped by her mother's friend, Sethe's mother in *Beloved* is raped and hanged by a white angry mob, while young Celie in Walker's novel is raped by her step-father. We also see the apparent killing of Angelou's rapist. And Celie's father is killed by white men. However, the characters overcome adversity and find ways to psychologically heal themselves. Angelou gives glory to God in healing her emotional bruises; Celie sublimates her repressions by writing letters to God, and Seth's mind splits in order to survive. Then each story seek redemption, forgiveness and peace.

The works of these three writers are rife with Black Feminism. They voice the repressed sentiments of a race which is "the other" of the mainstream. As women writers of African American origin, the 'Trio' has given the American (and world) readers values of egalitarianism and democracy. A comparative study of Angelou, Morrison and Walker gives us a slice of African American fiction which dabbles, with myriad themes that are common thread in their novels. The three writers refuse to see the world in black and white terms. They are "bi-racial" and "multi-cultural" and celebrate "humanity in diversity".

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