Resistance in the Poetry of Linda Hogan, Maya Angelou and Julia Alvarez

By
Mariam Magdi Nasif Morcos

Under the Supervision of
Prof. Mary Massoud

**In final fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**English Department, Faculty of Arts
Ain Shams University**

٢٠٠٩

Table of Contents

Preface

The purpose of this thesis is to tackle the concept of resistance, with special reference to the post-colonial and feminist approaches, in the poetry of three female contemporary poets from different ethnic minority groups, namely: Linda Hogan (Native-American), Maya Angelou (Afro-American) and Julia Alvarez (Hispanic-American), a topic which, to my knowledge, no one has yet tackled. The thesis will show the similarities among the three poets in subject matter and differences in technique.

The first chapter traces the multicultural history of American society. The second deals with the experience of displacement, pointing out its results of prejudices and conflicts between the "self" and the "other", on the historical, economic, social, psychological, feminist and linguistic levels. The third chapter handles the reflection of identity assertion and heritage within the framework of the "in-between" cultural situation, providing a definition of the concepts of "resistance", "identity", "pluralism" and "assimilation". It goes on to examine the poetry of Hogan, Angelou and Alvarez on the mythical, historical and feminist levels. The critic, Spivak, maintains that the subalterns' share of self-expression is a limited one, but the chapter argues that the accomplishments and aspirations of Hogan, Angelou and Alvarez prove the falsity of this theory. The fourth chapter shows the difference between the two concepts of "racial identity" and "national identification", pointing out the hopeful outlook of each of the three poets and their aspiration to reach internal and external spiritual satisfaction on all levels. The conclusion provides an evaluation of the findings of the thesis.

Acknowledgments

Deepest thanks go to my supervisor, Professor Mary Massoud, for her tireless support and valuable guidance.

Thanks are also due to my colleague, Manal Yassin, to Suzie Metry at the American Library and to the librarians at Ain Shams, for providing me with valuable sources.

List of Abbreviations

WW *The Woman who Watches over the World*

RC *Red Clay*

STTS *Seeing Through the Sun*

BM *Book of Medicines*

UA *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry*

Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou

CBS *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*

GT *Gather Together in My Name*

SS *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry Like Christmas*

GC *ALL God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*

HW *Heart of a Woman*

SFU *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*

CCP *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*

SD *Something to Declare*

OS *The Other Side*

H *Homecoming*

WKTO *The Woman I Kept to Myself*

GWW *Great Women Writers: The Lives and Works of ١٢٥ of the World's Most Important Women Writers, from Antiquity to the Present*

MAAL *Masterpieces of African- American Literature*

Chapter I
The Background

The Background

As a multi-cultural place, American society consists of a variety of different groups of people who have come to it from various other countries, with different racial backgrounds, languages and religions. These different backgrounds are part and parcel of the historical and cultural atmosphere of American society. This special diversity is reflected in the literary production of the country, full of special vitality which is derived from the contemporary attitude towards cultural progression. In this connection, Ferris writes:

> Multicultural literature is a major source of insight into the rich cultural dynamics of our society, a primary medium for Americans to comprehend our nation's rich cultural heritage, and for international audiences to fathom life and thought in the United States . . . U.S. authors of a multitude of backgrounds build bridges of understanding over which all of us can cross into each other's worlds (Springer *et al.*, ٥).

This thesis investigates the poetic accomplishments of three contemporary female writers, all belonging to the multicultural society of America: Linda Hogan (b.١٩٤٧), Maya Angelou (b.١٩٢٨) and Julia Alvarez (b.١٩٥٠). They are three prominent well-known literary figures. The first is a Native-American Indian, the second is an Afro-American, while the third is of Dominican origin. Their achievements in poetry and prose are prolific. Their literary works reflect their own experiences, and employ various themes and techniques. We shall first have a brief look at each of their ethnic groups.

<u>The Red Indians:</u>

Before the arrival of the first European settlers, Red Indians were the original Native inhabitants of the United States. Blake writes:

> It may be said, as a rough generalization, that immigration to the future United States was largely English during the seventeenth century and largely non-English during the eighteenth . . . Coming first and raising large families despite a frightful mortality the English element secured a dominant influence for their language and culture (٢-٣).

The English, being the first European settlers, affected with their cultural and linguistic heritage early American life and history. Blake accounts for this English immigration to America by pointing out that "the seventeenth century was a period of political and religious ferment" in Britain (٣). These political and religious upheavals, according to Blake, affected not only the British cultural scene, but also its American counterpart, since they led to the immigration to America of many Puritans, who had strong, conservative religious beliefs. To them, America was the land of expectations, where they could spread their own culture. In other words, they dreamed of achieving in America, what they could not in Britain.

According to Blake, there were economic factors also, leading to immigration. He says:

> Capital for the early colonization of America was supplied in large part by wealthy merchants and nobles who hoped to derive a profit from the trade. The last half of the sixteenth century had witnessed an expansion of English commerce into many new areas . . . little importance was placed at first on sending farmers to the New World . . . Preference was given instead to English artisans and miners and to Dutch, Polish, and Italian craftsmen who would teach their skills to the English (٤).

Acquisition of land was, definitely, an important aspiration of many immigrants to America. Land was a distinguished symbol of production and profit-making. It was considered an essential economic source of support for its owners and sharers. Thus, the imperial goals of the colonists appeared in their continuous attempts to have complete control over the source of all authority, namely: the land. As time went by, Blake says that "the desperate need for labor in the New World soon provided a mechanism . . . with the importation of servile labor"(٧-٨). This resulted in the presence of a variety of different social standards. High levels of life were accompanied by low ones.

The English, being the major source of immigration to America, changed the American cultural scene from the primitive Indian tribal society of the earlier days into the more modern America of today. The homes of the Red Indians were invaded by the sudden European advent. It seemed to the Whites, Starkey says, that "the Indians . . . were strange and their manner stranger". Their pagan cultures were regarded as primitive and illogical, and their life styles were considered below par

(٦٤). The old times of colonization were, indeed, very harsh to the Natives. Europeans discovered that the Native Indians had a special outlook on life. Their cultural aims, spiritual beliefs and activities of social milieu were newly different to the whites. This fact shed more light on how the Indian cultural identity envisioned itself, clarifying its symbols. Concerning the real nature of the relationship between the Red Indian and the colonizers, Starkey observes that "the colonists were to deal warily with the Indians, avoiding conflict so far as possible, and in this interest representing themselves as visitors rather than permanent settlers"(١٤).

Hence, the relationship between the Indians and the colonists was at first a limited undertaking. The colonizers did not wish to be involved in open clashes with the Indians. Starkey claims that "white men and Indians eyed each other in these years with a peculiar blend of fascination and repulsion"(٢٧). This mixture of different feelings resulted in developing their relationship under certain terms of contradictory attitudes. Starkey asserts that a few tribes, perhaps those who were treated roughly by earlier Europeans, were aggressive. Others, like the little settlement of Kecoughtans, were cordial. Most members of the two teams followed a policy of wait and see (٢٧).

Following the policy of calm patience, the Indians began to go through a new phase of expectation for the coming years to unravel the future intentions of the Whites on their land. As Starkey says: "At almost any time during the first decade the Indians could have exterminated the whites simply by leaving them alone . . . The starving times were not one but multiple. Without the Indians' willingness to barter their own by no means . . . Jamestown would have followed Roanoke Island into limbo" (٢٧).

Because the Indians kept a fruitful cooperative relation with the Whites, the colonizers began to acquire a more powerful presence. Starkey accounts for this by the fact that for nearly two decades the Indians did not think that the White men can threaten their lives, and they did not believe their story (٢٧). According to Blake, during these rather calm years, the Whites benefited greatly from the Indians' experiences, and their ready acceptance to help them with their long-acquired knowledge and wisdom (٢٤). In Blake's words, it is estimated that "the knowledge of corn, of how to grow it, was the most impressive contribution of aboriginal American culture to our own civilization"(٢٦).

Starkey mentions that, as years went by, the relationship between the Indians and the Europeans began to take more serious turns. He points out that their life together changed into a more dangerous phase, adding: "Recently there had been trouble. A petty chief whom the English called Jack of the Feather . . . had been accused of murdering a white man, and in resisting arrest had got himself killed . . . Opechancanough had at first threatened to avenge his death"(٦٤).

According to Starkey, this crucial event led to more troubles which ravaged the relationship between the Whites and the Indians. On the one hand, the colonizers' wish to annihilate the Indian race encouraged the emotions of hatred, brutality and torture, leading to hostile practices of suppression (٦٤). On the other hand, according to Trent *et al* , "the Natives of the woods of Maine and those of the everglades of Florida were equally skillful in devising methods of terrifying strangers who were thrown by chance or indiscretion amongst them"(٧).

In the early days, Native-Americans suffered greatly under the influence of European colonial invasion. They were tortured, murdered and their land was taken away from them by force. Their hearts bled as they witnessed the destruction of their civilization. This caused a terrible psychological damage to the Natives' dignity, since the land represented every factor of life, to them. Inside its depth lay all the seeds of hope. The "earth" was the dignified symbol of tribal pride. It symbolized both a physical and spiritual living presence.

Embodying the concept of "home", the "earth" stands for the physical existence of the Indian society. On the other hand, the land is the spiritual symbol of immortality. While all forms of life die and decay, the land remains. It gives birth to new ambitions of living people and takes into its vast dusty abyss the dead, who pass away on their eternal journey. Thus, the "earth" is the "home" of both the dead and the living. It is the most significant symbol of the Native-American identity. To Hobson, in glorifying the land, the Native-American cultural heritage continued powerfully, despite all the pressures of the imperialist occupation. He points out:

> Heritage is people. People are the earth. Earth is heritage. In remembering these relationships—to the people, the past, the land—we renew in strength our continuance as a people. Literature in all its forms, is our most durable way of carrying

> on this continuance. By making literature . . . we serve the people as well as ourselves in an abiding sense of remembrance (Springer *et al*., ٤١).

It is literature that helps keep the heritage of peoples and civilizations alive forever. The more one looks into the literary achievements of Native-Americans, the more one uncovers the truth of their historical consciousness and existence. Literature is the mirror which reflects the face of history. Peck gives a "brief" account of the nature of the literature of Native-Americans, relating it to historical formulations. He mentions three periods. The first, Peck says, deals with the primitive cultural material of the original inhabitants of America. The soul of this early art is the outcome of legendary heritage and oral articulations. Oral traditions and productions are the main foundation on which Native-American literature is built, leading to massive Native-American literary canonical undertakings, most of which, unfortunately, are lost, owing to the lack of written registration (٤٨).

The second phase, according to Peck, is transitional. In this middle stage, Native-American literary accumulation continues to have its oral background. It throws light on a very important historical era that witnessed the disastrous tragedies, taking place with the coming of the colonizers. The literary works of this phase describe the torment of the Native peoples under European occupation. They tell of how the Natives lost their dear lands. They also relate the sense of the spiritual insecurity, which they experienced with the landing of Europeans on their continent (٤٩).

As Peck says, it goes without saying that the third stage, the twentieth century, is the most notable artistic phase in the cultural history of this people. It draws a contemporary portrait of their life and art. At the same time, it establishes a wide link between the glorious past heritage, the temporary present occurrences, and the permanent hopes and possibilities of the future. It is through this literature that the Native-American intellectual and cultural assessment is crystallized clearly. Innovation supports the contemporary aspirations of working towards realizing new ends (٤٩). It is to this last phase that Linda Hogan belongs.

We are told that Hogan was born in Colorado in ١٩٤٧ of a mixed heritage. Being of a Chickasaw origin, she grew up on a reservation farm in Oklahoma (Votteler ٧٣: ١٤٧). Hogan speaks about her ancestral

origins, stating that her grandfather Granville Walker Young was a White "intermarried" Chickasaw citizen. Her grandmother witnessed the terrible event of the White occupation, and the famous Massacre at Wounded Knee (*WW*, ١١٧-١١٩). Thus, Hogan's grandmother became an important source of information to her.

Hogan mentions that because her father was in the army and was transferred from post to post throughout her childhood, she and her family lived in various locations while she was growing up (*WW,* ٩٢). Proceeding with her story, she says:

> THERE ARE ACCOUNTS of what our Indian world was like a little over a century ago. I've read the descriptions of Chickasaws before the Trail of Tears, the accounts of our beauty. Then, later, of our brokenness. Our people became so fragmented. We are nearly tragically missing from the pages of history (*WW*, ٥٤).

These words express two contradictory feelings: pride, on the one hand, and heartbreak, on the other. Although it is not easy for Hogan to confess that her people became lost historically, yet she takes note of these facts. She says that her people were forced to leave because they would face famine if they had not. They were removed from Mississippi and Tennessee by legislation created by Andrew Jackson (*WW*, ٥٤- ٥٥).

Hogan says that the "Trail of Tears" is not just a symbol of evacuation and humiliation. It is a metaphor of "betrayal", because of the sudden invasion that took place, followed by instant colonization. The Indians and the Americans stood in two opposed teams: one was powerless and conquered, while the other was powerful and aggressive. Later on, "the Federal government's plans in those days were to put all American Indian tribes in Oklahoma and build a wall around it, to keep us contained in the country which came to be called Indian Territory. It was then a place they didn't want", as Hogan writes (*WW*, ٥٥).

Hogan mentions that this was "reservation life". It was a life led by force under governmental oppressive practices. The Indians were forsaken from the White race. This wall built a psychological fence because the Indians were treated as "insignificant" creatures (*WW*, ١١٨). The frightening experience of existing under the shadow of this brutality

added to the degradation of the Indians. Hogan confesses: "It was a dangerous thing to be Indian . . . It was a time when it seemed that even hope itself was killed. And so, hiding our light became a daily necessity. Survival depended on it" (*WW*, ١١٨-١١٩).

The Chickasaws were mistreated horribly. This sort of treatment, that they received, aroused fear and disgust in them. They began to "hide" their heritage in order to pull themselves together. It was a method of preserving their culture. They needed to survive and transform their wisdom in order to be able to go on. Hogan writes: "I contain blood of both victim and victimizer. But I also hold that there are forces deeper than blood. It is to these that I look, to the roots of tradition and their growth from ages-old human integrity and knowledge of the world" (*WW*, ١١٩-١٢٠).

Hogan looks beyond the limits of miscegenation, searching for the origins which formulate the cultural experience of Native-Americans. She encourages the aim of human commonality, breaking all barriers among nations, races and cultures. Hogan continues: "The Chickasaws . . . had lost or been forced to sell our land, homes, horses, and world. We ended up owing the federal government $ ٧٢٠,٠٠٠ for the journey, charged for rations and assistance we hadn't even received, paying for the soldiers with their forceful use of bayonets" (*WW*, ٥٥-٥٦).

According to Hogan, this took place in the ١٩٣٠'s, a period which was a very disappointing era in the history of the whole world. She refers to "the Depression, foreclosures, and the closing of the banks" which caused the Chickasaws to lose their lands (*WW*, ٥٢). To her, these memories had a great effect on her outlook on life, influencing her poetry. Hogan adds:

> After the Sand Creek Massacre, when the men returned to their camp and found their women and children killed and mutilated, even sexually mutilated, they were in such dismay and despair that they stabbed and cut themselves, taking pain into the body, a way from what was seen . . . There would always be that memory of terror . . . That was the reason they hurt themselves . . . We are never not Indians. We have never forgotten this history (*WW*, ٥٩).

According to Hogan, the physical pain of self-mutilation can be a sort of expression, which represents the hidden spiritual horrors of the self.

Hurting the external body, the soul controls its internal emotions of rage, fear, shock and insult. Actions of collective extermination of the Indians will always remain in American history as eyewitnesses of the savage pull and tug, occurring when cruelty blinds the eye of the heart. Hogan recounts:

> The white men, after the massacre at Sand Creek, bragged about it on the streets of Denver. There was the white man who bought the skulls of the Sand Creek massacre victims . . . this too, their human darkness, continues today . . . the story of war and its tidal wave of violence, the falling of countries and civilizations. We human beings need to greatly reflect on . . . the inhumanity that lives within a human, side by side with our beauty and promise (*WW*, ٥٩-٦٠).

These scenes of "war" and "violence" were later to be contrasted in her poetry with "beauty" and "promise". The meaning of this contrast is the base of her life. To Hogan, "to reflect" is to create a hopeful poetic sense. She refers to all those who have influenced her personal and literary life, and helped her turn negative experiences into positive ideals, saying:

> Like everyone, I fell into the fire of all those other lives—my mother's, my father's, my grandmother's . . . In this, I became the meeting place of forces not my own. I must have known that there is something about the commingling of lives and spirits in all there randomness that makes for a spark of life that, like fire, creates change (*WW*, ١١٥).

The influence of others on Hogan was the most essential factor in the formation of her personal and literary career. And Hogan's writings were to become examples of her cultural cultivation. According to Hogan, as a child, her shyness, fragility, and lack of language were the result of the psychological confusion created by being Indian and American at the same time. She could not deal with these two conflicting faces of her personality. So she wanted to disappear from the external world in order to escape the internal pain. Students at school aroused her temper because of her difference from them. She says that her mother did her household duties but could not give love (*WW*, ٤٣-٤٤).

Hogan was disturbed because her relationship to her mother was not a normal one. Searching for the reason of such an unsatisfactory broken

mother-daughter relationship, Hogan points out: "I try to think about what it means . . . It is a coldness that has its origins in events, not people. In this case, I go back to the Massacre at Wounded Knee. I look back and see what forces led to the twisted violence" (*WW*, ٧٨). The outburst of wars, massacres, death and all other forms of bodily and spiritual annihilation led to the freezing of all the emotions of love, giving and sacrifice. In turn, Hogan's mother could not express to her family the emotions they expected from her, because she herself lacked the feelings of security. With a broken soul, Hogan remembers missing in her mother's eyes a motherly protective loving look of support. She recalls:

> THIS IS HOW I remember childhood . . . The house itself had no . . . interior doors, so there were no physical boundaries between my mother, my sister, and myself . . . Yet there were walls of silences between us . . . Silence . . . wasn't the kind of quiet I would later value as that place of human regeneration and peace. It was a powerless silence (*WW*, ٩٢).

This was a silence of spiritual shock, humiliation, and suffering; it was a silence of fear and impotence. Consequently, Hogan writes: "I became wordless outside of home"(*WW*, ٩٢). Hogan lost the ability to speak outside the house, because silence reigned inside it. It became the air that they breathed, and the food and water that they consumed. To her, silence was a person that spoke in a loud voice of oppression.

Hogan says that the circumstances of wars and separation made the relationship between young Linda and her father a cold forgettable memory. She did not recognize him on his return home. To her, the role of the father did not exist. He was an absent unknown figure from whom she fled and "cried". Thus, the presence of a father, in Hogan's life, faded away, as if it never really existed (*WW*, ٩٢-٤٩).

Later on, according to Hogan, gradually, the emotional coldness between Linda and her mother faded. The mother finally discovered how to practice and lavish her normal motherly emotions of love and support on her daughter (*WW*, ٩٤). She says that, eventually, the father could develop his "capacity for love" as well. After the Indian movements for resistance started, he made up for the lapses of time and distance for the sake of attaining a spiritual, more lasting, fatherly connection with his daughter (*WW*, ١٠٨-١١٥). Thus, like her parents, Linda could overcome