

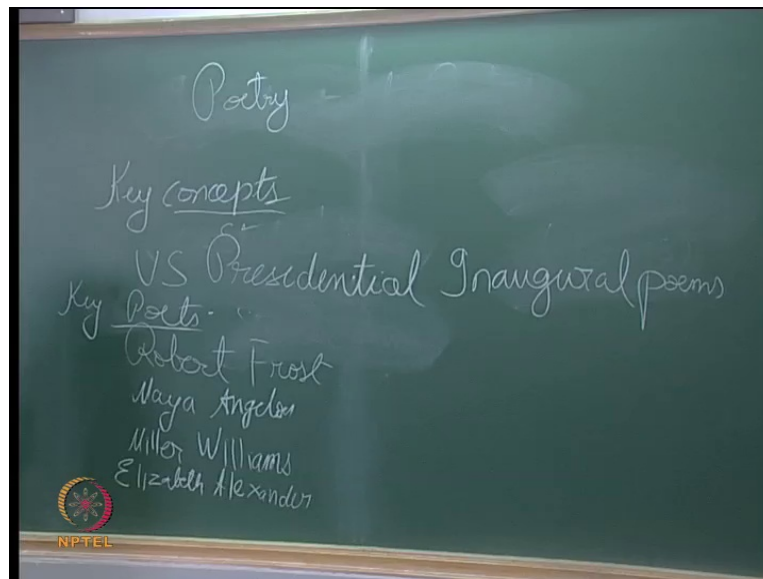
**Contemporary literature**  
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**Module No. # 01**

**Lecture No. # 40**

Good morning. So, as I had mentioned in my last class today, we are going to do the, certain selected poems, which are not your traditional typical poems. They are like historical documents, because, they were recited at the event of US Presidential inauguration.

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So, broadly, we will term these poems as US Presidential inaugural poems. So, that is the key concept for today's class and how these poems are representative of a particular moment in the US history. So, that is the importance of these poems. Key poets for, related to this category are Robert Frost, Maya Angelo, Miller Williams and Elizabeth Alexander. So, I will just begin the class with, familiarizing you with Robert Frost poem, which he recited during the inauguration of President Kennedy; that was in 1961 and the poem that he read was called, the, The Gift Outright. One unique feature of The Gift

Outright is that, Frost was not supposed to recite this particular poem; he had prepared something else, called A dedication for President Kennedy, but it so happened, that while he was, while he begin to read out the poem, he was 87 at that time, and somehow he could not clearly see the words, the printed words in front of him.

So, then, he put the paper away and recited another poem, The Gift Outright, which, a poem which he knew by heart and he was not depended on any paper to read that. So, I will read you The Gift Outright. This is just to establish the tradition of eminent poets reading at the event of inauguration of the US Presidents. So, President Kennedy began this trend by inviting Robert Frost, who was already an extremely eminent poet by that time. I am sure, most of us here, have heard of Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening and The Road not Taken and you know, several other The Buried Child. So, these are some very famous poems, Birches, After Apple picking. So, Robert Frost had already established a name for himself and at this particular moment in history, he was invited by the President to recite a poem during the inaugural function. So, here it goes, The Gift Outright.

The land was ours before we were the land's.

She was our land more than a hundred years

Before we were her people. She was ours

In Massachusetts, in Virginia,

But we were England's, still colonials,

Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,

Possessed by what we now no more possessed.

Something we were withholding made us weak

Until we found out that it was ourselves

We were withholding from our land of living,

And forthwith found salvation in surrender.

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright

(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)

To the land vaguely realizing westward,

But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,

Such as she was, such as she would become.

Now, this is the poem dedicated to the land, to the American land. And, Robert Frost clearly mentions that, earlier America was a British colony; the land was not ours; we did not possess it. But then, gradually, a change occurred; a monumental change. And, today at the inauguration, I am talking about the time when Frost would have read it, so, at that point, in history, again this is a historical moment. **ok**. It is an, a very, it is a very important, a moment in the US history; that is what Robert Frost suggests through his poem, because Kennedy, remember, symbolized change. He symbolized youth and breaking away from tradition. So, he was considered extremely modern, very liberal and inclusive in his outlook and therefore, a poem like this worked. However, Frost is, still was traditional.

And, from here, let us look at what Maya Angelou has got to say, about President Clinton. But, before we move on to that, let me just give you a very brief introduction to Maya Angelou and some of her earlier major works. So, Maya Angelou was born in 1928 and she is, **is** considered a founding member of the black literary consciousness in the US literary movement. Her most important, her seminal work is I know why the caged bird sings, which was published in 1969 and it is a volume, it is a six volume memoir, a kind of autobiography; it also includes many works of poetry. So, what does she talk about? So, she was born in Arkansas region of America and she talks about her, you know, growing up days in Arkansas, where they were dirt poor. And, one tragic event that marked her life was that, she was raped at age seven, by her mother's boyfriend; and later, when the incident was, this crime was revealed, that man was lynched by the enraged relatives of Maya Angelou's.

Now, as a, as a, as a consequences, as a consequence of these two incidents, one, her own rape and second, the killing of that man, they impacted, they affected Maya Angelou in such a way, that she became mute, for several subsequent years. And, she said, she felt that, and I am quoting her, I thought my voice had killed him, because she

dared to complain against him and therefore, as a result of that complaint, that man was killed. At certain level, she felt responsible for his death and she remained quiet for several years. In the later volumes of *I know why the caged birds sing*, bird sings, she also talks about her days as a cabaret artist; she was a performing artist and she also talks about that and then, later her involvement in the civil rights movement in America. Then, there was also a period in her life, when she chose to visit and stay for a long period in Ghana, and it was, according to her, an attempt to get in touch with her spiritual motherland, life in Ghana, that is in Africa.

So, the narrative in *I know why the caged bird sings*, are expressive and extremely personal; and they struck a chord with people; particularly, the Afro-Americans and they felt that, they, in Maya Angelou, they have finally, found a voice for themselves. And, it remember, it was a time, we are talking about 1969; so, the 70s and the early 80s were the time when the African American community, they were struggling with several issues; gender, race, political and issues of nationality and in Maya Angelou, they found a very, you know, stable, very influential kind of, **of** a person, who could make an impact, ok.

So, a voice of hope and a very sane and rational voice, that is what Maya Angelou is noted for. So, the great, one of the great hallmarks, or one of the great as I would say, of *I know why the caged bird sings*, is that, it broke out of the ghetto iced category of Afro-American writing and Angelou became a writer, who could be considered mainstream finally; so, she was not, just one of those writers, who was relegated to the ghetto, **ok**, to certain pockets, and read and celebrated only by the, by a particular race. But, she was, her writings were informed by the universal concerns, by the greater and larger concerns, that were prevalent in, **in** the then contemporary America; and therefore, her importance; therefore, her significance. And of course, her narrative of triumph over several personal tragedies, it spoke, not just to black readers, but also to women, all kinds of women; Asian women, white women, black women and as well as, gay men and women; and all these people, who were questioning their identities and their rights from the 60s onwards.

So, the poem that I, we are going to discuss today is called, *On the Pulse of the Morning*, which was recited at the Presidential inauguration of Bill Clinton. And, of course, as we just saw that, she, **she** became the second poet after Robert Frost, to be given this honor. And, the basic themes of, *On the Pulse of the Morning*, is, one is that, she cries out in

this poem to mankind, who has ignored or neglected the sanctity of human life, and as well as, nature, in all its forms, **ok.**

And, through the timeless voice and wisdom of rock, she uses three elemental symbols, the rock, the river and the tree, and she says that, the rock, the river and the tree, they all symbolize, how mankind is one with the earth and therefore, the poem is a plea to recognize the sanctity of nature, as well as human life, **ok.** So, her message, among several other, you know, one of the prime message is, it is a plea, not just to be inclusive of all kinds of people, but also to be sensitive to the nature and the environment all around us and to which we are so blatantly, neglectful of. So, this is the poem, On the Pulse of the Morning by Maya Angelou. And, here she begins,

A Rock, A River, A Tree

Hosts to species long since departed,

Marked the mastodon

So, the poem famously begins with, a rock, a river, a tree; it is a elements of nature, which never change; they are always constant; human beings may come and go, but these elements will remain; these (( )) of nature will always remain. And, hosts to species long since departed marked the mastodon. Mastodon is again, one of the extinct species like dinosaur. So, several species have come and gone, but the, **the** rock, the tree, the river, they are never changing.

The dinosaur, who left dried tokens

Of their sojourn here

On our planet floor,

Any broad alarm of their hastening doom

Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

If the dinosaurs were about to get extincted, we would never know; if there was a flurry of events trying to save their, save these species, we would never know; because, everything has been lost; what remains, the rock, the tree, the river, **ok.** And, dinosaurs,

today, they are just a subject of scientific study and research. So, they have, all that we know about dinosaurs, or a species called dinosaurs, is a handful of bones, that are left behind; their skeletons, which people research, scientists research and try to come to some conclusion about the manner and the reason for their extinction, but we would never know. So, again, this poem becomes a plea, you know, to nurture the nature, to take care, to be more responsible for the environment around us.

So, remember, this poem was recited in 1993, when President Clinton was taking his oath and, and it, it was a time, when all these, civil right movements of course, you know, we had the first cycle also earlier, but this was also a very, you know, water shed period in the US history. So, civil, you know, human right movements and concerns about the environment, concerns about people with deviant forms of sexuality, the lesbians, the gays and also concerns for various races, not just the Afro-American people, but also the Chinese, the Arabs. So, Maya Angelou is encyclopedic in her knowledge and she covers a range of areas; she covers a, an array, a broad array of topics, or issues, that need to be discussed; and, she chose an extremely appropriate moment, to give voice to her concerns.

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,

Come, you may stand upon my

Back and face your distant destiny,

But seek no haven in my shadow.

So, the nature, they may give protection to you, they may give, it may give support to you, but do not do not expect forever protection from it. You, one has to, you know, fight for ones rights; you cannot expect someone else to fight for you. So, that is the idea.

But seek no haven in my shadow.

I will give you no hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than

The angels...

Now, this is a reference to mankind; human beings, you are just notch lower, notch below the angels; you are almost heavenly; almost god like, but and therefore, it is all the more important that, you take responsibility for your actions.

...have crouched too long in

The bruising darkness

Have lain too long

Face down in ignorance.

So, again we are talking about darkness and a darkness of ignorance; human beings have spent much too long time, wallowing in self pity, wallowing in ignorance. So, it is about time to face realities.

Your mouths spilling words

Armed for slaughter.

The Rock cries out to us today, you may stand upon me,

But do not hide your face.

So, this is a warning of creatures, who have long been extinct. So, you can depend on nature, but you cannot hide behind it; you cannot, you can no longer escape, by making excuses. So, it is time to face the consequences of your actions.

Across the wall of the world,

A River sings a beautiful song. It says,

Come, rest here by my side.

So, almost like the rock, the river too, is ready to give a sort of a shelter, but not refuge; shelter, you can, you can enjoy; you can enjoy nature; you can derive from, derive benefits from nature, but you cannot be a parasite; but do not hide your face. So,

Across the wall of the world,

A River sings a beautiful song. It says,

Come, rest here by my side.

Each of you, a bordered country,

Delicate and strangely made proud,

Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.

Each person has an identity of his or her; delicate and strangely made proud, yet thrusting perpetually under siege. All of us deserve certain degree of integrity, ok. All of us deserve respect, but what happens is that, we are, we, **we** feel perennially threatened and perennially, we are perennially seeking refuge, finding excuses for seeking refuge. And, this will not be allowed anymore.

Your armed struggles for profit

Have left collars of waste upon

My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.

Yet today I call you to my riverside,

If you will study war no more. Come,

Clad in peace, and I will sing the songs

Now, this is, these lines, they suggest extreme concern for environmental issues. Now, what she saying is that, what, actually, the river is calling out, is that you, **your** struggle for profit, **ok**. Human beings have a tendency to make profit by everything; by, you know, exploiting resources all around us, whether it is the earth or, **or** air, or water. So, wherever one can, one finds opportunity to make profit, that, that resource is exploited; but, no more; no longer, if you want your species, your race to survive, you cannot get away with this kind of behavior.

So, Your armed struggles for profit

Have left collars of waste upon

My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.



Yet today I call you to my riverside,

If you will study war no more.

War, an actual war and also waging a war against nature, and natural resources; if you promise to stop this kind of behavior, which is not acceptable anymore, you are welcome to come and stand beside me and enjoy. So, what she is talking about, is basically, there is a still hope for mankind, but mankind has to look at, what they are actually doing. So, it is, it is, there is a, **a** strong need to look; for self introspection; to see, which way we are going and then decide, what we want for ourselves and for next generation, for generations to come.

So, Come,

Clad in peace, and I will sing the songs

The Creator gave to me when I and the

Tree and the rock were one.

Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your

Brow and when you yet knew you still

Knew nothing.

The River sang and sings on.

There is a true yearning to respond to

The singing River and the wise Rock.

Now, the river, like the rock, the river too has complaints; but before human being became, human beings became too wise, you know, too wise and too clever for their own good, before they became too cynical, before they became too materialistic, the river was able to sing for them; but the river is, once human beings stopped caring for nature, **nature** started, nature stopped caring for them, **ok.**

So, once that process of caring for each other stopped, the river stopped singing; this is symbolical; this is extremely suggestive that, nature would not care, if you do not care for nature. So, there is a strong yearning to respond to the singing river and the wise rock. Now, comes another section of the poetry.

So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew

The African, the Native American, the Sioux,

The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek

The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,

The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,

The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.

They hear. They all hear

The speaking of the Tree.

Speaking of the tree, symbolizes speaking of the wise; of the, you know, symbolizes the same voice, the voice of wisdom; the, **the** trees speaks to everyone; nature speaks to everyone; nature does not discriminate between people, between races, between communities. The human beings discriminate; we have created boundaries. But for nature, all are alike; all are same; the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jews, the Africans, the Native Americans, the Sioux, the Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek, the Irish. So, I will, remember, America prides itself on being a melting pot of the several cultures and diverse people. So, America and its people, they pride themselves on being a crucible of different races and people, and culturally and historically, how they have been open in all, inclusive of various kinds of people; but, Maya Angelou raises the question, if it is really true; because if it is really true, then, there should not be any, a practicing of any kind of discrimination, between people. Nature does not differentiate, but human beings do; and also, it is not just the races, but it is also the types of people, the gay, the straight, people who are not considered straight.

So, she also speaks for the rights of gays, lesbians. So, there should not be any form, or any kind of discrimination, against people on the basis of their races, their languages,

their nationalities, and, **and** their sexual leanings. So, the preacher, the teacher, the privileged, the homeless, all are alike in the eyes of nature.

They hear. They all hear

The speaking of the Tree.

Today, the first and last of every Tree

Speaks to human kind. Come to me, here beside the River.

Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River.

So, again, notice the repetition. Now, she is trying to emphasize, how important it is to be close to the nature, **ok**. Come, sit beside me; come, beside the river. So, this, this is important. So, she, this is not suggestive of any kind of monotony; this repetition, actually emphasizes the need of the hour, and that is, to inculcate a sense of environmental awareness, and also to, you know, to be sensitive to the rights of people, who we not consider as our own, who may be very different from us; so, that is what we need.

Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River.

Each of you, descendant of some passed

On traveller, had been paid for.

You, who gave me my first name...

You, that is Maya. So, you remember Maya Angelou, so, she acknowledges the tribe, Mayans and therefore,

You, who gave me my first name, you,

Pawnee, Apache, and Seneca, you

Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then

Forced on bloody feet,

Left me to the employment of

Other seekers -- desperate for gain,

Starving for gold.

So, historically, we are told that, the black people were sold by, you know, a kind of people, the mercenaries, in exchange for gold, in exchange for money, and she is telling us that, she belongs to one of those tribes. So, her people were sold; her ancestors were sold in America for a few pieces, in exchange for a few pieces of gold.

You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede, the German, the Eskimo, the Scot,

You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought,

Sold, stolen, arriving on the nightmare

Praying for a dream.

And, what dream is this? The American dream. So, all kinds of races have sold and have been sold in America. And, when people come to America, of course, they are in search of that elusive American dream, which, which literally comes true for everyone who is determined and who is willing to work hard; but again, it may not always be like that. So, the dream may begin and die, begin and end with the person, but everyone comes in search of some dream.

Here, root yourselves beside me.

I am that Tree planted by the River,

Which will not be moved.

I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree

I am yours -- your passages have been paid.

Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need

For this bright morning dawning for you.

History, despite its wrenching pain

Cannot be unlived, but if faced

With courage, need not be lived again.

So, these are important influential lines.

For this bright morning dawning for you.

History, despite its wrenching pain

Cannot be unlived, but if faced

With courage, need not be lived again.

You cannot erase the past; you cannot undo what has always, already been done, **ok**. But then, if we have courage, if we have the drive, historical injustices need not be repeated. So, we do not have to go through the injustices of history all over again.

Lift up your eyes upon

This day breaking for you.

So, again, as we were talking about earlier, the poem is a call for hope; it is a call for equality and concern for environment, and concern for human people, and races, human beings and a people of all races. So, lift up your eyes; you know, look at the world with pride; the day breaking for you. So, birth of a new day, a new dawn calls upon.

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.

Perhaps, this is now, a reference to the coming of, **of** President Clinton. Remember, President Clinton again, like President Kennedy, he too was a symbol of great hope for the American people. He came immediately after the first gulf war, and America was in a state of a political and financial crisis and in, Clinton, like Kennedy, was youthful and considered extremely liberal and modern in his outlook, and therefore, symbolized hope and peace for it is people. So, his coming, you know. So, seize the moment, seize this day, when, **when** there is a arrival of some kind of hopes, a new dawn for us.

Mold it into the shape of your most

Private need. Sculpt it into

The image of your most public self.

This is the time, when we can actually, we realize and actualize ourselves, with a leader like a President Clinton; this is a moment that needs to be cherished, molded and sculpted.

Lift up your hearts

Each new hour holds new chances

For a new beginning.

So, again, extremely hopeful and optimistic in its tone.

Do not be wedded forever

To fear, yoked eternally

To brutishness.

So, the fact that we have a President like this, it symbolizes, it, it gives us a kind of hope. So, throw away the mantle of fear; just cut yourself off from all kinds of ignorance and brutishness, because hope lies in front of you. So, remember, as, like all inaugural poems, this too is, **is** a very significant poem in the US history; it marks a particular

political moment; it is a very important political document, because there is a message here; because like Kennedy, Clinton too symbolizes hope. How far, how far those hopes and aspirations have been realized? Well, that is for history to decide, but these two men, they stood for something; they symbolized something. So, therefore, the relevance and significance of poems like these.

The horizon leans forward,

Offering you space to place new steps of change.

Here, on the pulse of this fine day

You may have the courage

To look up and out and upon me, the

Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.

So, the horizon leans forward offering you space to place new steps of change. You will be given some space. It is, this is figure of speech, you, **you** can, you will have opportunity to carve a niche for yourself. Here, on the pulse of this fine day, this is the, this is the fine, this is the fine day, beginning of a very fine moment in, in a political history of America.

You may have the courage

To look up and out and upon me, the

Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.

A note of patriotism.

No less to Midas than the mendicant.

A very good example of a literation. Midas, the king, who, of course, we all know the myth of the King Midas, whatever he touched, it turned into gold.

So, an extremely rich man, as well as the mendicant. The country is, **is** the same for both. So, country offers equal opportunities for the very rich, as well as for a beggar.

No less to you now than the mastodon then.

The country and the environment, it is still the same; and all the opportunities are still the same; they, **they** are not much of a difference, and with a new President in the form of President Clinton, we are going to have better times; you can look forward to better times.

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.

So, here on the pulse of this a new day, now, this is how, the way the poem ends.

Here, on the pulse of this new day

You may have the grace to look up and out

And into your sister's eyes - sister's, your fellow being, fellow human being into your brother's face. So, look, you should have the courage to look into everyone's eyes, with, **with** a sense and feeling of hope, optimism and equality. So, look up with pride; face the future with hope, optimism and pride.

Your brother's face, your country

And say simply

Very simply

With hope --



Good morning.

Morning symbolizes hope; a new beginning. So, this is a new beginning for all of us. So, that is, that is *On the Pulse of the Morning* by Maya Angelou. Very important document symbolizing a kind of political change in the US political history, and also relating to issues of diversity and changeover time and equality in America. Also, notice a imagery tone and the theme of the poem. So, lots of imagery from nature; tone is of optimism and hope; of course, and theme also. Thematically, it raises several issues; equality and dignity for all human beings. So, one influential poem that I wanted to do with you; and now, coming to your assignment, what you should be doing, based on this work. So, as we just talked about the key poets, the four major poets who have been invited to recite poems at various inaugural functions, Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Miller Williams; Miller Williams is another important poet, who was invited to recite his poem at the second inauguration of President Clinton; he served two terms.

So, during the first term, it was Maya Angelou; during the second term, the inauguration of the second term, it was Miller Williams. And then, for President Obama, very recently, in 2009, a scholar and professor of literature, Elizabeth Alexander, she recited a poem. So, by way of your assignment, I would like you to look at these poems and write a comprehensive kind of an essay; how important are these poems in marking a particular moment in the US history. So, that is what, I will the send you a, a more elaborated form of this assignment soon. So, thank you very much. That is the end of the course. Thank you.