



Profundity of Truth in the Paradoxes in Amanda Gorman's Poem "The Miracle of Morning"

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Article Info

Abstract

Received: August 6, 2024

Accepted: September 12, 2024

Published: October 22, 2024

Amanda Gorman speaks through the language of paradox in her poem "The Miracle of Morning". Her artistic expression, appealing voice and the aesthetic of the language of paradox instill hope and a sense of community building in people to survive the unprecedented crisis of Covid-19. She captures the hopeless mood of the American people battered by the unknown disease and attempts to soothe the bereaved hearts and minds who are mourning the unexpected loss of lives and are living under the unknown fear of the pandemic. To discuss the aesthetics and effectiveness of the language of paradox, this paper uses Cleanth Brooks' theory of poetry. His concept of the language of poetry as the language of paradox supports the analyses of the imagery and paradoxes in the poem drawn from day to day lives and familiar activities. This paper argues that such language enables the readers to perceive the ordinary or the commonplace differently, positively and hopefully, and helps them realize the profound truth of the complexes of human lives. Gorman fills the crisis-ridden people with positivity, hope and unity to overcome the unknown fear as a common human crisis. The high production of poetry during the Pandemic approves the power of poetry and its language to heal the deeper wounds and give company in moments of separation and loneliness that people had to bear while keeping with the social and physical distancing. Poetic imagination steers the readers to in-depth truth that lies beyond the explicitly paradoxical situations that ordinary minds fail to perceive.

Keywords: *Pandemic, paradox, positivity, profundity*

Introduction

Amanda Gorman's (2020) "The Miracle of Morning" rejuvenates people with the sense of unity, wholeness and hope in the subtle expressions through the language of paradox and imagery. The poet asks us to transcend the mundane worldviews of differences and cultivate the sense of oneness, humanity, hope and perseverance to fight with the unknown challenges. She expresses her views on the need for harmony, community building and its force to lift up the fallen societies and the frustrated people. The paradoxes and the images are drawn from ordinary lives and look simple but they produce some profound truths about human societies, the power of positivity and the hopefulness to continue our lives. The elements of pathos she uses do not only evoke empathy regarding the unknown fear and losses but keep readers aware and critical about the shared vulnerability that should be battled collectively with a positive note of hope and victory.

In the same line, Barajas (2021) interprets this poem as Gorman's "promise of healing, like the light of morning, that springs from despair" (para. 1). He finds in her words a "poetic answer to pandemic grief . . . early on in the coronavirus pandemic when [American] people were only beginning to comprehend the scale of national mourning to come" (para 1). He implies Gorman's poetic vision and insights that could foresee the impending disasters of the disease battering the human societies. Hence, Gorman (2020) is preparing the helpless victims to convert their pain into energy, "to give it a purpose, to use it." and "weather" it together. Weathering the "unknown" requires knowing new ways, finding a purpose in pain brings strong experiences and using pain to defeat it draws out the best of you. The entire poem composed of paradoxical expressions aesthetically asks us to resolve the paradoxes and dilemmas of life positively and artistically.

Relating to the paradoxes Gorman (2020) uses, the contradictions like “mourning” and the symbolic “morning”, clouds and sunlight, chaos and clarity, suffering and solidarity are casual happenings in life. But our ability to blur the dividing lines and realize the oneness can help us overcome even the undefeatable situations and complexities. The whole poem as a piece of creativity proposes a remedial perspective to overcome the unknown crisis in our lives. Our abilities to find opportunities in challenges, to feel hope in frustrations, to grow more empathetic in separations; to come more human out of the cruel, inhuman and selfish behavior and manifest the best of us at hard times are the life forces that keep us moving ahead. How irreparable losses and destruction can be converted into new creations, mourning can be transformed into new energy and community building can be founded on true love and empathy is what Gorman asserts through the language of paradox. Hence, this paper explores the paradoxes used in the poem, relates them to the context of the pandemic and probes into the deeper significance they carry in elevating the readers’ understanding of in-depth truths implicit in the ordinary things. It claims that the poetic imagination and the language of paradox Gorman has used in the poem give us a critical and holistic perspective to see and realize the profound truths at the moments of adversities and crises in lives that threaten the very existence of humanity itself. Her aesthetic expressions broaden our worldviews, enable us to overcome the hazards of life and re-energize us to keep going by our positive response and solidarity. This study contributes to the realization of the transformative effect of creative writings and paradoxical expressions upon the readers and the writers themselves as a common platform of social and psychological healing.

Review of Literature

This paper reviews some pertinent poems by some other poets and Gorman herself, finds the uses of paradox and relates them to Gorman’s (2020) poem “The Miracle of Morning”. It traces the subtlety of their expressions and probes the profundity in Gorman’s paradoxes. To substantiate the argument on the language of paradox, it reviews Cleanth Brooks’ (1947) concept of paradox discussed in a seminal essay “The Language of Paradox” and its critical receptions. It also finds the departure point of this paper and claims that the poem “The Miracle of Morning” not only uses some paradoxical expressions but is a whole package of paradoxes rendering the aesthetic and persuasive tone of hope and perseverance throughout and is transformative in effect

Brooks (1947) distinguishes the language of science from the language of poetry in the sense that science requires a language “purged of every trace of paradox” [but] the poet’s truth can be approached only in terms of paradox” (p. 3). He means to say that the language of science is referential and unambiguous to convey clear information and findings. But a good poet reaches a profound state which blurs the lines of differences as does Wordsworth with the elements of the wonders and the commonplace in his poetry. Brooks contends that “paradox is a language of sophistry, hard, bright, witty — hardly the language of the soul” (p. 3). He rather claims that it is the language of poetry which is inevitable to capture the essence of the human. He illustrates Coleridge’s famous lines from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”: “He prayeth best who loveth best” (as cited in Brooks, p. 4) and compares it with Wordsworth’s direct attack, less sophisticated but yet paradoxical lines: “It is a beautiful evening, calm and free / The holy time is quiet as a Nun / breathless with adoration. . .” (as cited in Brooks, p. 4). The context of Wordsworth’s poem is the poet’s visit to worship when the girl next to him looks indifferent to the god. Wordsworth’s meaning comes out of the paradox that the girl is filled with worship for “all”, not only for solemn or “beautiful evening” (p. 4). Brooks implies that even the simplest of Wordsworth’s poems has paradoxes.

Furthermore, Coleridge’s quote supports Brooks’ idea that prayer to God generally demands sacrifice of love, attachment and instincts but the truth he speaks is beyond the common understanding of worship and love. Defining love and worship should also define the vantage point from which love is weighed. Is love only an attribute to humanity and worship only to God, the transcendental? Love and worship intertwine for a poet’s visionary world that can’t be separated from the real world. Arguing on Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium”, Richards asserts that it “is finally a poem about the nature of the human imagination itself” (as cited in Brooks, 1947, p. 172). It justifies the oneness of the real and the imaginary for Yeats gains the moment of ecstasy by resorting to Byzantium, an ideal world of his poetic creation. Likewise, one of the proponents of magic realism Marquez (1972) portrays in his “The Last Voyage of the Ghost Ship the times when the young boy fails to distinguish the real from the imaginary, and finds the absence much dearer than the presence. The young boy in the story gets absorbed more in the world of fantasy through which Marquez breaks the hierarchy between the real and the magical. So is the case with the poets.

A good poet labels him or her with a sage who envisions the truth in the intertwining of contradictions and complexities. The poet adds charm and novelty to things of everyday life in a state of awakening as does Yeats, a mystic who resorts to an ideal world of Byzantium through his poetic imagination (Brooks, 1947, p. 172). Coleridge (2022) experiences a holistic view of the “snow” in the “sun”—the juxtaposed images, existing together in his poem “Kubla Khan”: “A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice” (line 36) and he achieves that power through his imagination. Brooks justifies Coleridge’s faith in the power of imagination expressed by Coleridge himself: “It reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects . . .” (as cited in Brooks, p. 17). Brooks reinforces the effect of the imagination referring to these series of paradoxes that make “a great and illuminating statement” (p. 17). Crane (1952) blames Brooks for ignoring the aesthetic and imaginative part of poetry and focusing the centrality of paradoxes as inevitable to poetry: “Brooks never treats poems in relation to the kinds or degrees of delight they afford; if the word “pleasure” occurs” (p. 90). He means to state that Brooks’ theory of poetry is reductive that sums up poems as the expression of paradoxes. But Brooks views that the reconciling of the contradictions that reveal the profound truths is possible only in the poetic imagination that surfaces in the form of paradoxes. However, both Crane and Brooks agree to the use of imagination and the effect of delight through poems. Crane claims the aesthetic value in different items or fragments whereas Brooks believes in the organic unity of the parts to give the pleasure. Brooks (1947) denies that paradoxes are sophisticated expressions, but they are rather “divinely irrational” (p. 3). While discussing Derrida’s concept of the metaphoricity of language, Lyngdoh (2021) quotes: “In the words of Lakoff and Johnson, “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action . . .” (para 21). He analyses how Derrida deconstructs the linguistic binaries of metaphorical language and the day-to-day language and advocates for the assimilation of contradictions to realize the truth. Although he had a different context of discussion to conclude that language is always metaphorical, his claim for the failure of literal language to communicate supports Brooks’ idea of the deficiency of referential language to express the realities of deeper human experiences.

Likewise, Devkota’s (2008) “The Lunatics” confers superpowers to an insane person who claims: “the ethereal is palpable to me // And the insignificant individual I have raised / Up an ascending arch of praises / Into the seventh heaven” (lines 6, 91, 92, 93). Devkota’s lunatic character is the creation of an awakened soul of the poet, not the irrational persona in the general sense and is given with the illuminated Self to see beyond the differences. Devkota’s (2002) another popular poetic work *Muna Madan* exploits the realization of truth by a “Lahure ‘ detached from the family in the quest for material prosperity. The iconic lines expressed by Muna to Madan: “*Haatako maila sunako thaila k garnu dhanale / saaga ra sisnu khayeko beshha aanandi manale*” (line 2) epitomize the profound truth about optimum happiness in the minimum of material gains—the paradox of gaining happiness in poverty against the common sense of happiness in being rich. Despite the different critical scholarship on various poems that have used paradoxes, Gorman’s (2020) short poem “The Miracle of Morning” has not drawn much attention to its critical reception regarding the powerful paradoxes it has used. So, this paper examines how the poem sprinkles a similar illuminating message about human potential to fight the unknown disease/Corona Pandemic and regain the “sweet smile”. Hence, the affects the poem evokes lies in the use of subtle language of paradox that reveals the truth through a critical and holistic worldview she proposes for internalizing the contradictions and discriminations by oneself. Instead of blaming the unknown as an enemy, she asks the readers to accept them, learn to live with them by pursuing an all-encompassing positive approach to the moment of crises. And the language of paradox and images imparts to her poem the subtlety of expression and persuasive strength.

Methodology

Within qualitative research, the study used document analysis to analyze, collect and interpret data (Adhikari & Magarati, 2022) from the poem in question. It further utilized an interpretive approach to construct the meaning from the text supported by critical scholarships and theoretical perspectives related to poetry and the language of paradox. The primary source of data for textual analysis is Gorman’s (2020) pandemic poem “The Miracle of Morning”. To clarify paradoxes, this paper uses Brooks’ (1947) theory of poetry and concept of the language of poetry as the language of paradox given in an essay entitled “The Language of Paradox” included in his book *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Brooks distinguishes the language of science and language of poetry in it. He implies that the language of science cannot grasp the essence of human sufferings which the

poets capture through the language of paradox and imagination. Brooks is implicative of the limitations of referential language of science regarding human conditions but the power of poetic language that speaks through images and paradoxes. The visionary poets use the language of paradox, ambiguity and complex attitudes to reveal profound truths as does Gorman (2020) in “The Miracle of Morning.”

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the textual analysis of the poem by examining the paradoxes it contains and interpreting them to find the deep meanings. The textual data, consisting of the paradoxes and imagery, support the discussion to draw clarity in understanding the profound truth Gorman (2020) expresses about resilience and lifting up the fallen lives during the pandemic. Some theoretical perspectives and the critics’ insights are brought into references to substantiate the arguments on the issue of the language of paradox. It further presents the conclusion about the power of the language of paradox to communicate the in-depth human conditions and experiences.

Textual analysis: The paradoxes

The paradox begins with the title of the poem “The Miracle of Morning”. The ongoing banality of the inevitable morning after every night contradicts the “miracle” foregrounded in the title. Common sense fails to capture the gravity of the expression that a poetic mind grasps in the paradox. With morning sunshine, we resolve to do something new and for a good beginning. The sunlight energizes the lethargy of the night and endows with hope of new possibilities and opportunities. The continuity of night and the day also suggests the circularity of life with its sorrows and celebrations. Besides, the profound truth behind this expression is the transitoriness of every problem that has got to come to an end under the law of nature. But Gorman’s morning- miracle is the hope of resilience and recuperation while on an unwarranted threat to human health by an unknown disease. Gorman’s (2021) enlightening poem “The Hill We Climb” she recited in the inaugural ceremony of Joe Biden’s presidency articulates relevant meaning as in the line: “It is a past that we step into and how we repair it” (line 39). Her reference is to the need of retrospection of the past to rebuild an integrated history of the American people in the leadership of Joe Biden. This theme is relatable to Gorman’s (2020) message endowed in “The Miracle of Morning” which portrays the magnificence of the normative morning with the renewal of values redrawn from the lessons of the past for a better, and new chapters of lives. The first stanza elaborates the ambiguity of the title with an unexpected difference of the “golden morning” preceded by the “mourning” that the world is bogged down by. The “heavy clouds” and the “storming” society paradoxically forebear the rain and calmness respectively suggesting cleansing, fertility and peace in the aftermath. The magic of morning spreads the sunlight “wide and warming” that may refer to people’s realization of the importance of collectivity and harmonious relations. The succeeding imagery of “a dad with a stroller” (line 5) on a “jog”, a “bright-eyed girl” (line 6) chasing her dog; a grandma on her regular prayer with the “rosaries” and a young neighbor with her “groceries” verify the rejuvenated people intact in their usual works and duties. Dad and baby, jogging and running, rosaries and groceries together give us a glimpse of acceptance of each other, unity in diverse modes of living and movements of people back to life.

Drawn by the observations around the morning, the sensory perceptions drive Gorman (2020) to philosophical contemplations about the illusory feelings of being “small, separate, and all alone” (line 9). Buffeted by the “unknown”, deserted and desperate on the losses, ironically the people have been “more closely tethered” and intimate to each other (line 10). It defies the psychoanalytical worldview which believes that desertion and scarcity deteriorate one’s character. Bettelheim (2001) reasons differently about how crises shape individuals, in his interpretation of the popular fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel”: “Poverty and deprivation do not improve one’s character, but rather make him more selfish, less sensitive to the sufferings of others, and thus prone to embark on evil deeds” (p. 168). Against this grim tale of decline in individuals’ character proposed by Bettelheim, Gorman fortifies the stronger foundational relations of community building to fight the desperations and draughts regarding the struggle with the “unknown”. The question is of overcoming the fear of the unknown by the force of unity and collective efforts. Drawing our attention by breaking the structural uniformity of the stanzas of four lines into two, Gorman (2020) asks the readers to promise to “mend” and “bend” but not to “be broken” that has the paradox immanent in it. Mend and bend refer to our liberal relations for unity and unification.

Regarding unity, the paradox used in “As one, we will defeat both despair and disease” embodies a profound

truth of the need of defeating “despair and disease” at the individual level first (Gorman, 2020, line 15). That enables a person to empathize with others’ grief, the sense of oneness, the paradox of “all in one”. “As one” may connote an individual who needs to be upgraded beyond sensory perceptions. It also means growing compassion to feel others that gives sense of “one”. Sense of unity grows when we accompany each other, inculcating in us the selfless service to the common good by overcoming all the contradictions and respecting all walks of lives. The poet moves the readers strongly with her positive approach to the shared crisis, sense of hope and fair voice of respect to all against the common politics of villainizing others. Gorman (2021) speaks more for common values than identity politics against racism even in her poem “The Hill We Climb”. In Biden’s inaugural function while reciting the poem, she hopes: “ We will rise from the sunbaked south / We will rebuild, reconcile and recover / And every known nook of our nation and every corner called our country” (lines 93, 94, 95, 96). She champions for equality and calls for recognition of every “nook of the nation” referring to the reservation areas of the marginalized Black population. But even behind this political concern of the “cornered” populace, there lies the paradox of fragmentation and wholeness of the country. Addressing the “sunbaked south” paradoxically is addressing the whole nation on a deeper level because the injustice to the black in the South is not only a political issue of the black people but a concern even of the white community and the nation as a whole. This element of pathos evokes a sense of solidarity and unity to fight the shared issues of the Americans.

Elements of pathos

Gorman’s (2020) rhetoric blends with the element of pathos. Her voice is appealing when she addresses the people, institutions and businessmen as heroes and selfless companions to fight the disease (line 16). The paradox of “loss” of lives and “learning to love” inherits multiple dynamics of truth about lives and human societies. This reminds us of a dialogue by the character named Vision in the Marvel series *WandaVision* directed by Shakman (2021): “What is grief if not love persevering” that potently argues for the deepening of love and valuing it more after one loses it (episode 8). Grief is born out of love which is quite paradoxical. In the same vein, Chopin’s (2017) “Story of an Hour” enacts the paradox of loss and renewal with the newly found freedom in Mallard (p. 209). Mallard fancies true happiness and freedom after she hears the news of her husband’s death. Quite ironic to the conventional responses to deaths of the nearest ones, she finds the profound source of happiness in personal freedom. Love must be defined from different vantage points to know its true meaning. Losing the husband manifests with the love to her newly found freedom but it requires a critical review of our thoughts and values to understand the newly achieved love to herself. If analyzed from Mallard’s angle as an individual but not as a wife, love needs redefining. This slippage of meaning and the process of redefining reminds us of Derrida’ breach of the binaries between the language of metaphor and the literal language and asks us to reflect on Brooks’ argument on the “language of paradox” that elevates us to a broader understanding of higher truths. Brooks counter-argues the critics who regard it as a sophisticated and intellectual expression but labels it as the language of the soul and the specificity of poetry, inevitable and powerful. Such contradictions pervade our lives too as they do within the imaginary world of the poets.

Gorman (2020) reflects on the contradictions between “chaos” and “clarity”, “suffering and solidarity” and takes us to a different level of understanding about our relations, perspectives and realization of the differences. What one regards as chaos may be freedom for someone else and if experienced through another’s lenses, it opens up with multiple truths. Recognizing plurality broadens our outlook over differences and widens our relations towards co-existence. Similarly, after unbeatable suffering, people develop solidarity to cope with it as the essence of humanity that otherwise feels more painful if not fought with a sense of collectivity and empathy. Life and death are not only about individual pains and gains but also about realizing them as a joint undertaking of mutual help and cooperation. In the seventh stanza, the poet echoes a great philosophy of life force that hope embodies in the paradoxical expressions of “grief” and “gratitude;” “hope and loss”; “enduring in vain” and its purposefulness. This truth of hope Gorman fills in us contradicts with the message of the holy scripture *Gita* (...) that asks us to be devoid of expectations and hope. But when life is left with enduring the undefeatable and the unknown, hope becomes your “Duty” or “karma”, a recourse to live more. So, she proposes to give purpose to pain and ache that humanity is given as the essence and the realization of this truth brings a little comfort in our lives. She calls for a positive response to the unknown and asks us to take it as a part of life. It enables us to “emerge stronger”, “grow fonder” and internalize the “owes’ as friends, not enemies. Rumi (2018) in his poem “The Guest House” preaches to follow a similar course of life that empowers us to live with positive vibrations even in troubled times. He meditates: “This being human is

a guest house / Every morning a new arrival / A joy, a depression, a meanness / some momentary awareness comes / as an unexpected visitor” (lines 1-5). He implies that being human is living with the familiar and the unfamiliar that demands our heroic response of acceptance and positive welcome. This short excerpt captures what Gorman (2020) wants to convey to her readers about the challenges they are coping with and the effective ways to tackle them. The paradox of “moments” of threat to humanity and its lasting impact to “humankind” is quite ironic in the poem. It is because humanity fails to be humane in the ordinary time but a few critical moments inoculate in humans the sense of humanity. Such “testing times” reproduce “the best of beings” with sweet smiles and the new beginnings in our lives.

Aesthetically, Gorman (2020) refills in the readers the human potential of overcoming the unprecedented and unknown crisis with the collective force of unity, solidarity and hope. The affect and critical thoughts her poem evokes about lifting up fallen lives and communities come out of the subtle expressions composed of the language of paradox that pervades the whole poem.

Conclusion

Gorman proposes a positive outlook to crises and art of resilience through a powerful language of paradox. She awakens the readers to realize the human capacity of defeating the unprecedented and unknown mysteries collectively as a common threat. The aestheticizing of the ordinary events and objects in paradoxes throughout the poem renders persuasive strength to her expression of the complexities of human lives in the face of global pandemic. Her poetic imagination surfaces in holistic portrayal of the contradictions at the moments of exhaustion caused by social distancing, deaths, griefs and mourning. The mourning can be transformed into energy and life force for better relations and proximity. The poem epitomizes Brooks’ concept of the language of poetry as the language of paradox. In a context where the outbreak of emerging and reemerging diseases cause threat to humanity itself, the poetic mind of Gorman enriches the grieven people with strength and art of living in crises. To fill the lapses of referential language that fails to communicate the deeper human realities, her language of paradox evokes in the readers a sense of community building, unity and critical response to the common threats and shared vulnerability. She inculcates in the readers a higher level of linguistic awareness to understand the in-depth human experiences, enriching them with new energy to continue lives creatively by transforming themselves into much stronger, proactive and empathetic people to accept the unknown challenges as uninvited guests.

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