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# Gender and Racial Empowerment in Selected Works of Maya Angelou

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ABSTRACT

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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GENDER AND RACIAL EMPOWERMENT IN SELECTED WORKS

OF MAYA ANGELOU

Committee Chair: Timothy Askew, Ph.D.

Thesis dated August 2019

This study examines Maya Angelou as a powerful African-American woman in the twentieth century who impacted generations of African Americans. Her biographies and selected poetry speak strongly and wisely about gender and racial empowerment. This empowerment was sown in her childhood and could be traced throughout her life. It is also a fact that seldom does the realization of one's race and gender take place at such an early age as with Maya Angelou. She was highly marginalized not only in terms of gender but also in terms of race with acute consciousness of being "undeservedly...relegated to second-class citizenship" (Walker 93).

GENDER AND RACIAL EMPOWERMENT IN SELECTED WORKS  
OF MAYA ANGELOU

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Whatever readers may draw from the powerful and strong verses of different poems, the fact remains that Maya Angelou was a powerful African-American woman in the twentieth century, having impacted generations of African Americans as well as white readers across the globe and beyond the United States' boundaries. Even the impact of her verses about gender and racial consciousness reverberated across the continents. The seeds of this empowerment were sown in her childhood and can be traced throughout her biographies. It is also a fact that seldom does the realization of one's race and gender take place at such an early age as with Maya Angelou. She was highly marginalized, not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of race with acute consciousness of being "undeservedly...relegated to second-class citizenship" (Walker 93).

Maya Angelou's birth name is Marguerite Annie Johnson. She adapted Maya Angelou to simplify her name because her brother, Bailey, who also appears in her autobiographies, called her "Mya Sister." She was born in St. Louis, Missouri on April 4, 1928. Her father, Bailey Johnson, was a dietitian in the Navy and worked as a doorman. However, her mother, Vivian Baxter, worked as a nurse at an early age. Maya Angelou and her brother were sent to Stamps, Arkansas to live with their paternal

grandmother when the marriage between Bailey Johnson and Vivian Johnson ended. Although the times were very rough, her grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson, was leading a prosperous life thanks to her general store in Stamps which did well even during the Great Depression following World War II. Although they were living happily in the strict moral care of their grandmother, their father, Bailey Johnson, suddenly came and returned them to Vivian Baxter where they lived happily until Angelou was molested by Freeman, a friend of her mother, who was later murdered. They were dispatched back to their grandmother for education (Gillespie et al. 1-12). Maya Angelou spent most of her time with her grandmother during her childhood.

With regard to education, Angelou was very fortunate. She was sent to the California Labor School where she read almost every other renowned author under Mrs. Bertha Flowers' mentorship, a great teacher from her childhood. Maya Angelou was all praise for Mrs. Bertha, saying that she was "the aristocrat of Black Stamps" and appeared "warm in the coldest weather" (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 83). She was attracted to her because she was entirely different from the other people around her. Mrs. Flower's influence on her was so strong that Angelou considered her an "answer to the richest white woman in town" and had remained with her throughout her life (83). In fact, she and her grandmother Henderson were good friends. Moreover, Mrs. Flowers infused in her the spirit to read and learn more. She used to stress the significance of communication and language, trying to instill in her a love for reading and writing as she used to say, "It is language alone which separates him [man] from the lower animals" (86).



After graduating from the school Toussaint L'Ouverture in St. Louis, Angelou began working as a streetcar conductor in San Francisco and married Tosh Angelos, despite having a son without being married. Vivian Baxter did not approve of the marriage, but Angelou went through with it. She began taking modern dance classes and later started dancing though she failed to make a career of dancing during this first phase of her career in show business in San Francisco. However, her career started to take off after her divorce in 1954. While working in the Purple Onion, a night club, she became popular using the name of Rita, which was taken from her original full name. She became popular in Europe during her tour in the next year and became a polyglot, one who speaks many languages. Later, she was introduced as a singer in movies. However, this turn in career did not satisfy her creative soul, and she soon joined the Harlem Writers Guild which became a passion of her life in the writing career (Gillespie et al. 18-45).

Although she joined the guild, it was John Oliver Killens who urged her to move to writing due to her creative energy. She met Rosa Guy and Julian Mayfield and was inspired by the civil rights activist, Martin Luther King Jr. In fact, Vicky Cox, one of Angelou's biographers, stated that she found a new job in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference where she was made a full time civil rights worker. She met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. later. She soon started taking part in the Movement and became an organizer of its local organization and began working for the welfare of African Americans.

Maya Angelou began acting in plays and writing for newspapers in Egypt after she moved to Ghana and worked at the University of Ghana in 1962. During this time, she worked for Ghana Radio and some local newspapers and returned to the United States in 1965 to help Malcolm X build an organization to help African Americans (Cox and Shapiro 51-62). There was a career hiatus when the murder of Malcolm X sent her into depression. Therefore, she started acting and writing. Instead of mourning the loss of her icon, she began writing and published the first part of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in 1969. This book was followed by other books of the same sequel in 1974, 1976, 1981, 1986 and 2002 with different pauses during which she wrote very strong poetry and published from time to time.

She married Paul Du Feu but again divorced in 1981. Maya Angelou published several poems and short books. All the poems have been collected in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. Maya Angelou has been hailed as the greatest black woman poet of her age. However, she was not content with just writing poetry; she also wrote cookbooks, screenplays, movie scripts, and biographies (Gillespie et al. 170-185).

For her contribution to African-American poetry and prose, her part in the Civil Rights Movement, and her work in society, Maya Angelou has been hailed as an international icon. She was included in two presidential committees. In 1994, she won the Spingarn Medal. President Obama gave her the most coveted Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011. Universities around the globe have showered honorary degrees on Angelou. She received more than fifty honorary degrees for her contribution to literature. After leaving her impact on the generations to come, she died on May 28,

2014 when her nurse found her dead in her bed at home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (Gillespie et al. 190). As a writer of poetry which has impacted people around the world, Maya Angelou was an amazing writer whose poetry speaks strongly about gender and racial empowerment.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Many literary scholars have written on Maya Angelou's works. Literary scholars have examined the role of gender and race in Angelou's writings. Regarding Maya Angelou's poetic output and her identity of race, color, and gender, Margaret Courtney-Clarke argued that Maya Angelou's African-American heritage informed her writings (14).

Terrasita A. Cuffie has also echoed Margaret Courtney-Clarke's views regarding Maya Angelou's blackness and her childhood in Stamps, Arkansas (15-25). In both cases, Angelou had an acute sense of her being black and her being a young girl having attraction for the young boys of her age. Commenting on the first chapter of the book *Growing Up Black*, Cuffie said that throughout Angelou's childhood, she had heard the word black from the white girls, which instilled in her the sense of belonging to the African-American community (15).

In a sense, this was a double realization that both Margaret Courtney-Clarke and Terrasita A. Cuffie mentioned in their biographies. Specifically, Margaret Courtney-Clarke commented that Angelou's entire life was a "complex history" bedecked with racial and color discrimination from her early childhood (14). Both of the biographers agreed that Maya Angelou realized and was conscious of her race since her childhood.

Judith E. Harper, another biographer, has almost followed the way of the biographer Margaret Courtney-Clarke in writing about Maya Angelou's black journey through her childhood in that Angelou had the realization of her black identity and from her relationship with the black community. Judith E. Harper, in her book, *Maya Angelou: Journey to Freedom*, said that she actually realized freedom and empowerment because she had a wholesome home environment during her stay in Stamps. (10).

Jayne Petit has written much about Angelou's realization of her blackness in her book, *Maya Angelou: Journey of the Heart* (13). She noted that Angelou's first realization of her blackness from her early childhood and instilled in her the sense that she belonged to a different class and race (14).

Almost all of these scholars agreed that Angelou made a conscious effort to escape discrimination and to become an icon. Pierre Walker did a praiseworthy analysis of Angelou's racial protest, identity, and her empowerment on the basis of these two features: color and African-American heritage. He offered two important points from his commentary on Maya Angelou. The first was that Maya Angelou rightly used her pen for her political aims:

The problem is that African-American literature has, on more than one occasion, relied on confirming its status as literature to accomplish its political aims. Since slavery relied on a belief that those enslaved were not really human beings, slave narrators responded by writing books that emphasized the fact that they themselves were humans who deserved to be treated as such (92).

In fact, Walker pointed toward the black writers who have shown in their biographies that they, too, are human beings, as he cited Claude McKay and Countee Cullen (92). He noted that this was the strategy of Maya Angelou to write about human beings who fought against racial discrimination.

Pierre Walker stated about the writing of Maya Angelou that she took the readers back to the original debate sparked by the book of Vicki Cox and Miles Shapiro that actually both the issues, color and race, related to Maya Angelou. Feminism was raging in the United States during the early years of the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement was also ongoing. These two developments, Pierre Walker argued, impacted African-American literature of that time. Therefore, both feminism and the Civil Rights Movements heavily impacted Maya Angelou's life as well as writings. Pierre Walker praised highly the thematic unity of her autobiographical works. Walker stated that *I Know Why Caged Bird Sings* is much like a collection of short stories, but its political impact is very much obvious everywhere (94). The movements and political events impacted Angelou's writings as well as her worldview.

Commenting on different incidents in which Maya Angelou learned ways of dealing with situations of racial and gender discrimination, Pierre Walker said that Angelou learned to respond to different situations such as her interaction with "powwhitetrash" girls, her response to her rape, and "subsequent muteness, and her life with her grandmother (95). Angelou also learned the power of language from Mrs. Bertha Flower, her childhood teacher, who taught her how people wield words and use language (97), which gave her the gift of poetic language later in her life. Although

Pierre Walker did not talk much about Angelou's traits of dealing with situations and responding to circumstances, Ingrid Pollard discussed her biographies from this angle: "Maya Angelou, a dancer, singer, writer and poet, is a woman who has realized her own power" adding that she is "A Black 'hero' of our times" (115). Pollard also praised Angelou's first autobiographies where she discussed "cruelty and racism" as common features of her life which later became powerful incentives of her life (115). Pollard praised Angelou in the last pages of her article, saying she is "An example of a black woman taking control of her life" (117). Pollard asserted that Angelou used these two features, color and race, to become a powerful figure in life.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese also praised Maya Angelou and another female writer, Zora Neal Neale Hurston, saying both had been icons of the African-American struggle. She further stated that Maya Angelou realized that the tight web of "gender, race and condition" around the black women did not leave any possibility for their "self-representation" (223). Fox Genovese was of the view that "any understanding of the self led back over dusty roads to Southern cages" (223).

Vicki Cox explained that Maya Angelou's hasty marriage to Tosh Angelos gained her a sense of her own feministic qualities. She knew from this realization that her mother was also beautiful and that she resembled her; therefore, she was beautiful too. This was perhaps the first sign of her realization of her own beauty as a woman. This sense became even more of a realization when her mother berated her marriage.

The realization in Angelou's life that strongly impacted her creative faculties was her own legacy of being from the African-American community. She married Paul

du Feu, a white Briton, whom she met in London, despite her misgivings of interracial marriage. Her husband became very impressed with her writing (70-71). He even praised her when she wrote the second volume of her autobiography in 1974. According to Cox his words motivated her to write more (71). However, it was not just about her talent and about her heritage of being African-American descent but also about her being a black woman.

Cox noted that Maya Angelou's account of first realization about her race dawned upon her during her life in St. Louis. Maya Angelou did not just use her life experiences to talk to black people, she also used these experiences to help people of all races. The view of Cox was that all critics referred to the same incidents in Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (10). Angelou talked about her life experiences which were about the human condition, "I speak to the black experience, but I am always talking about the human condition—about what we can endure, dream, fail at and still survive" (10). Angelou's words summed up her philosophy of survival—that is, she must not accept defeat as her destiny (10). In fact, Maya Angelou believed that nobody should accept defeat: "You may encounter defeats, but you must not be defeated" (10). This statement showed her determination to surmount all odds against her.

Another biographer, Donna Brown Agnis, posited that Angelou's experience with equality occurred in Ghana when she was there with her son and where she experienced no color discrimination: "For the first time in their lives, they were surrounded by people of their own color" (51). In *Singing and Swinging and Getting*



*Merry Like Christmas*, she became acutely conscious of both inherited traits: her color and race. She was also conscious that she was living in a white neighborhood, and when she saw a white woman, Louise Cox, she thought about this contrast between black and white women. She wrote, “White men adored them, Black men desired them and Black women worked for them” (14). In other words, she was conscious of the power of being a white female, and hence also aware of how to use this power to her own advantage.

This realization opened her eyes to the fact that she would have to work to win men and even work for white women, her counterparts. In this autobiographical sketch, it seemed that Angelou realized her racial as well as gender identity. She also realized the power that comes with both of them to exploit them later in her career. Nellie Y. McKay beautifully stated this in her essay, “The Narrative Self: Race, Politics and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography” published in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. McKay said, “Thus, in the struggle against oppressive sexual and racial authority, the black female stands at once alongside and apart from white women and black men, joined to the struggles of each but separate from both in a system that still privileges and maleness” (97).

Commenting on the dominating position of white women, Nellie Y. McKay argued that white women had the good chance to come out of their feminine weakness during the previous century to negotiate seriously with patriarchy that joined their class interests with those of the white men (97). However, this could not happen in the case of black women who were valued for their productivity and labor (97). In other words,

white women have come out from the patriarchal domination, but black women could not, for they had to work very hard with men. It was also that their own men treated them as such, while society saw them through the prism of labor force.

When Angelou discussed the themes of race and identity in *The Heart of a Woman*, racial and gendered identities seem to be central themes. This book opens with her experience when she lived within an experimental community with an unnamed man (*The Heart of a Woman* 09). However, Hilton Als, a writer for *The New Yorker*, stated that it was Maya Angelou who “unwittingly reveals her own shortcomings” by describing the character of Holiday. Als clearly stated that Holiday saw in her a great woman but not in singing but writing (Als). It is surprising that Als concluded that Holiday was “moderately talented” and was perpetually “unable to understand who she is” (Als). In fact, it was Maya Angelou’s own assessment of Holiday that forced Als to draw this conclusion. Maya Angelou found Holiday a common person having a language of “mixture of mockery and vulgarity” (Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman* 11).

Dolly McPherson stated that Angelou became an icon of her own culture and joined the political movement for her own identity (93). Angelou’s role in the formation of “The Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage” evidenced her as more active in political events than her own show business career (*The Heart of a Woman* 143).

Many scholars wrote on raging feminism during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s when women in the South joined the feminist movement. Marjorie J. Spruill was of the view that voices not only impacted the government and politics but also the

African-American segment of the population, specifically, women that surely impacted in southern African American women (40). Mary Jane Lupton, a scholar of Maya Angelou, commented on the impact of feminism on Angelou's personality and works, saying the feminist surge of 1970s in the United States was indebted to the Civil Rights Movement of 1960s. She added that during this period, most of the black women also formed their own feminist organizations and launched their campaigns to exit from the patriarchal clutches (71).

Citing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Lupton said that though Angelou was quite vague about feminism and her support for it, her argument of having economic independence, having control of her education, and having sense of power led her to support implicitly feminism which she declared openly after some time. She was clear that when asked if she was a feminist or if she supported the feminist cause, Angelou had been vague (77). Lupton stated that the impacts of feminism were strong despite Angelou's ambivalent attitude toward it in her first biographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. However, with the passage of time, this became strong which she openly supported. Lupton stated that Maya Angelou commented several times that she must have been stupid not to be on her own side, which meant that she should have always supported feminism and gender equality (77). Maya Angelou wanted black women to be "self-reliant" adding "I am a feminist" (qtd. Elliot 162).

Regarding Maya Angelou's part in the African-American women's resurgence, Helen Taylor was of the view that Angelou had been very advanced for her age, but she owed it to the "moral earnestness of American feminism" (Taylor). She added that

Maya Angelou had the power to emulate even blues and jazz divas through her biographical sketch of her own feminism (Taylor).

James Baldwin paid tribute to Angelou's feminist quality saying that she opened a new era "in the minds, hearts and lives of all black men and black women" (9).

Referring to her autobiographies, her political contribution, and her relations with other feminist icons, Jessica Care Moore argued that she was a "prominent voice of feminism" who has had an impact on the black girl through her towering personality (Moore).

Roy affirmed that Angelou has never been a feminist in the true sense of word, but she was rather Alice Walker's womanist (94). Roy further added that Angelou actually worked to promote unity and diligence among black women in order for them to be able to survive in white supremacy prevalent in the United States (84). Angelou was a womanist, a strong woman of her time in her community, and Angelou did not politically support any feministic movement of that time (Walker 94). However, Angelou's poetry is full of poems of feminist ideas such as *Still I Rise*, *Phenomenal Woman*, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which could be interpreted as examples of her leanings toward feminism. Her poems address gender discrimination and gender empowerment—hallmarks of her poetry.

Angelou's autobiographies and studies of the other reviews regarding of her autobiographies and biographical sketches show that she learned much from her life as a black girl in Stamps, Arkansas, at other different places, and from various relatives, friends and other characters she met in life. With the passage of time, she came to realize that she could achieve her dream of reaching the top and become an icon.

### CHAPTER III

#### MAYA ANGELOU'S GENDER EMPOWERMENT IN HER SELECTED WORKS

Reviews and critiques of Maya Angelou's life and works in the literature review section give an important glimpse of Angelou, not only as a notable black figure but also as a powerful African-American woman. Her gender empowerment is not simply an arduous struggle against the domineeringly patriarchal African-American social setup, it is also a towering effort against the dominant white superiority of racial segregation within the United States. What has put her in this unique position is not just being a powerful figure, but her realization as a black woman having all the necessary feminine features that could be employed to elevate and motivate others through gender and racial empowerment.

Citing her interview, Mary Jay Lupton argued in her paper, "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity," that Angelou has gone through almost all roles of a woman during her lifetime and has reflected them in her five-volume autobiographical narrative (257). However, what struck Lupton the most is Angelou's struggle that she called a "poetic adventure" of a woman with a myriad of characters springing back and forth in her biographical works (257).

Mary Jane Lupton argued that Angelou deliberately engaged in gender empowerment in her autobiographies. This also showed her realization of the same power in herself. This empowerment was demonstrated through her poems. She knew the power of being a black female.

*Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou is another poem that gave voice to her feelings of gender empowerment about black women strongly and powerfully. Comprising 43 lines, this poem has seven quatrains and two end stanzas which make a total nine stanzas. Some stanzas have the refrain “I rise” repeated several times. And this refrain repeated almost ten times in the entire poem shows the first signs of gender empowerment.

Succinctly reviewing, the entire poem comprises Angelou’s defiance through black women’s racial and physical attributes and interrogation of her oppressor or opponent’s surprise or bewilderment at her lively attitude of showing him that she can rise up despite the oppression.

The very first line of the poem announces the audience with second person “You” with assertion that the oppressor or the addressee may do what he wants, but she will rise up; whereas stanzas one, three, six, eight and nine talk about her specific qualities that bewilder the oppressor; the second, fourth, fifth, and seventh stanzas highlight her questioning defiance. She questions her oppressor what surprises him, how it surprises him and that even if he wants her down, or subjugate her, she has the courage to stand up again “I rise” (36). This strain of “I rise” (36) continues until it becomes a regular repetition in the end of the poem and is repeated almost five times in the last stanza. Therefore, it becomes a refrain by the end.

A micro analysis of the poem may elicit more about Angelou's gender empowerment interlinked with racial discrimination. Although the first stanza addresses her oppressor and she resolves by the end that she can rise up, the second stanza questions her oppressor. She feels pride and pleasure at how the oppressor is feeling the pangs of jealousy: "Why are you beset with gloom?" Maya Angelou asks the oppressor (Line 06). When she aligns natural elements with her, it seems as if she is deriding her oppressor that even nature is with her. It also shows that she is a daughter of nature who can rise up like the moon, the sun and the tides as stated in the third stanza. Therefore, there is no question of her hopelessness; she seems to say adding more questions in the fourth stanza to make the oppressor realize that what he wants to see she cannot do. The picture presented in these questions is of a very oppressed figure.

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?

Shoulders falling down like teardrops,

Weakened by my soulful cries? (Lines 13-16)

The words "broken," "bowed," "lowered," "falling," and "weakened" show the historical image of a slave. African Americans were treated worse than animals. The picture made with these images is that of the very lowly human being who is at the mercy of the oppressor. However, the very next stanza shows the defiance, as if she has risen from the ashes like a sphinx. She interrogates the oppressor to ask that her pride may offend him, as she is pretending to have gold mines. The sixth stanza may seem a

challenge after this because it again addresses the oppressor with the second person “you” that points to her courage after this show of defiance. The seventh stanza repeats almost similar rhetorical questions but the stress is upon “sexiness” (Line 25) and gender attributes that are supposed to have empowered Maya Angelou. Then the eighth and ninth stanzas repeat the past and point to the future of “I rise” defiance. There is a hope in the end. This shows that Maya Angelou has been hopeful about her bright future.

This succinct analysis shows that Maya Angelou not only shows defiance but also derides her oppressors and exerts her feminine side that she thinks is powerful and strong. A further analysis by Andrew Spacey and Gary Hess, also pointed out the same meanings of the poem.

According to the analysis of Andrew Spacey on *Owlcation*, the very structure of the poem highlighted the “mantra fashion” (Spacey). He was of the view that this mantra aimed to target the oppressors to realize how they were treating their subjects differently. The structural pattern of the rhyme scheme, he argued, is enough to point out its sculptural image that he says seem to have “granite plinth to stand on” (Spacey). Spacey’s view about the poem is based on the images and the loudness that the words evince in the face of circumstantial oppression through which the poet must have gone in the past. The elements of nature enumerated in the poem also intended to raise hopes of the poet, Andrew Spacey said, adding that this leads to “defiance” in the poem about the poetic expression (Spacey).



This defiance of the speaker or the poet starts from the very first stanza, a quatrain, which highlights the second person “You” as Spacey also pointed out in his analysis (Spacey). This “You” is directly addressing the oppressor, or the white patriarchy, or white authority to make it realize that the woman in question can still rise up even if she is oppressed more. Her defiance continues in the second stanza with the rhetorical question of “Does my sassiness upset you?” which points to another question about the “gloom” that has beset the oppressor on account of her gait of pride. By including the elements of nature in the third stanza, she clarifies to the oppressor who happens to be her target audience that even the nature is with her, as it is a natural thing that she should be treated equal to the oppressor. Angelou then goes on to question in the fourth stanza to inquire of the oppressor what he wants from her by keeping her subjugated and bowed down. The same strain of rhetorical question continues in the sixth stanza with the same reference to wealth but then suddenly Maya Angelou turns to her oppressor with the same second person “You” to state that he can do whatever he wants. He can shoot her with words or cut with eyes or subject her to hatred, but she is destined to rise again. Until now, it has been her sassiness that she has stated in the first line of the second stanza, but now in this seventh stanza it turns out “sexiness” (Line 25).

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise

That I dance like I've got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs? (Lines 25-29)

All four lines of this stanza hint to Angelou's gender. Sexiness is a certain feminine quality of attracting the opposite sex. The first reference may point to bodily attraction, but the second is of her sexual quality. Both of these natural attributes combine to give her power and strength; or in other words, this becomes a gender empowerment in Maya Angelou. Spacey rightly pointed out in his analysis, referring to the earlier sassiness and interlinking with this sexiness to argue that "The word *sassiness* suggests an arrogant self-confidence, backed up by the use of *haughtiness*, and *sexiness*. The poet's use of hyperbole with these three nouns adds a kind of absurd beauty" (Spacey). It continues in the next two stanzas.

In the eighth stanza, she describes the history of slavery and racial discrimination where the poem comes back to her race. The constant strain of refrain "I rise" continues in this stanza and repeated twice after every assertion that she has suffered historical shame of racial discrimination and subsequent pain of this discrimination. Commenting on the sixth stanza, Spacey said that she has come to the climax to speak about the oppression (Spacey). On the other hand, Gary Hess who taught English in Southeast Asia, argued in his analysis that these two last stanzas speak about "the history of the African-Americans through slavery and how horrible it was." The last stanza points out how she has started afresh after leaving everything behind. Four commentary lines interspersed with the refrain of "I rise" repeated five times add to the sense of empowerment among the readers of the poem. Although the first line of the stanza refers to the past, the third line refers to the hopeful and bright future leading to the 39th and 40th lines that show her pride over her heritage and the

dream of the future that she is going to have. The three times repeated “I rise” affirms to her defiance that she has started in the beginning of the poem.

However, the very title of the poem “Phenomenal Woman” is an indicator of Angelou's self love as well as the realization of her empowerment as a woman. She is not an ordinary woman but a “phenomenal” one:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.  
 I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size  
 But when I start to tell them,  
 They think I'm telling lies.  
 I say,  
 It's in the reach of my arms,  
 The span of my hips,  
 The stride of my step,  
 The curl of my lips.  
 I'm a woman  
 Phenomenally.  
 Phenomenal woman,  
 That's me. (Lines 1-13)

Structurally, the poem comprises four long stanzas with no regular number of lines, as all four stanzas have a different number of lines. However, sometimes they rhyme with each other without any regular rhyme scheme. What makes the poem distinct

is that it is written in colloquial form where Angelou tells what the white and other women ask her, and how she responds to them.

Although the poem *Equality* reverberates with racial discrimination, victimization and its impacts on the poet, it also gives a sign that she is a female and that she wants to be recognized. However, this could be a realization of her gender but within the poem *Equality* it seems that she wants her identity recognition as it says:

You announce my ways are wanton,  
that I fly from man to man,  
but if I'm just a shadow to you,  
could you ever understand. (Lines 11-14)

These lines from the poem “Equality” clearly show that Angelou realized that she was a black woman, but this is not what she had stated in earlier poems such as “Still I Rise” and “Phenomenal Woman.” Angelou mentions her realization of the power she has had as a female, but this stanza marks a complete difference. The gender realization is clear in the second line of this stanza which stands out from the rest and tells the past of Maya Angelou, but she reiterates this in the third and fourth lines that she is just a “shadow to you” (Line 12) which is a reference to white man or white cultural construct. This is in stark contrast to her prose of “In All Ways a Woman” which gives a full glimpse of being a woman that means to “become and remain woman.” (“In All Ways a Woman”).

However, another poem, “Ain't That Bad?” when compared to both of them shows how Maya Angelou has discussed men as their necessary counterparts in the fight

against slavery. This poem has a total ten stanzas: The first four stanzas have four lines; the fifth and tenth stanzas have seven lines each with a certain interrogative refrain, while the rest are the same that are called quatrains or four-lined stanzas such as given below which has seven lines and has two refrains.

Now ain't they bad?

An ain't they Black?

An ain't they Black?

An' ain't they Bad?

An ain't they bad?

An' ain't they Black?

An' ain't they fine? (“Ain't That Bad?” Lines 17-23)

Commenting on the same poem, Anne H. Charity Hudley, a professor of Community Studies at the College of William and Mary, argued that such poems give the reader a sense: “Angelou gave us the language and the courage to tell our stories” she argues adding that she “sounded like my grandmother” (Hudley).

Although the next two stanzas have rather long lines, they speak about her racial heritage and not about the feminism or patriarchy. However, immediately after this are two quatrains or four-lined stanzas, and both contain references to African-American icons such as:

Arthur Ashe on the tennis court

Mohammed Ali in the ring

Andre Watts and Andrew Young

Black men doing their thing. (Lines 32-36)

The same is the case of other two major poems “Human Family” and “Equality” which are concerned more with racial segregation and the condition or plight of African American men rather than women. In the same tone, Angelou states “but I’ve not seen any two / who really were the same” (Lines 20-21).

In “Equality,” the main idea is not upon men or women but on “we,” or race and not women or men in particular. It means that she has given equal significance to both men as well as women of her race but have thought it better to be in collectivity with the men as her use of first person plural shows.

In brief, both of these poems “Still I Rise” and “Phenomenal Woman,” when put into contrast with other poems, seem to be full of the realization of the power that comes with being a female and how to manipulate and exploit of this power to her own ends. The other poems are set in contrast with these poems. They further accentuate this realization of the powers of being from the opposite gender when contrasted with the same power the men have. This has happened due to her being from the marginalized community of African Americans where even men were enslaved with their women, and both have struggled hard to win equal rights. According to Maya Angelou and a representative of her culture, D. U. Juan concluded in his article, “Interpretation of Black Culture by Maya Angelou Through Music Poetry” that “With the right choice of imaginative words and phrases and musical styles, she interprets black culture and promotes the thinking of a race’s past, present and future” (84).

## CHAPTER IV

### MAYA ANGELOU'S RACIAL EMPOWERMENT IN HER SELECTED WORKS

Although several of Maya Angelou's poems clearly explain Angelou's racial empowerment, she has not only discussed issues that her race has to face but also has given important features that she herself used to become an empowered individual. The racial features, specifically her physical features, gave her an upper hand over others, especially among the women of her age and race. The poems such as "Still I Rise," "Phenomenal Woman," "Equality," and others discussed in this section first give an impression of how she uses historical clues to define her racial identity. The poems also discuss Angelou's physical features which define her persona and then give clue to how she used these features and how these features helped her win a unique position in the American society. Although she has discussed these features of her racial identity in her autobiographical narratives, her poems succinctly present the same features and repeat them.

Before discussing the poems, it is important to discuss her identity construction and its awareness before referring to her poems. In fact, Fanon highlighted this fact about black people's identity in his phenomenal work *Black Skin White Masks*, as "objecthood" (82). It could also be stated as the "double consciousness" of Du Bois which he said was "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (08).

However, it cannot be claimed that it was always the case with her, for she has liberated herself from this sense but it stays deeply ingrained in the psyche.

As far as racial identity that poems discuss, it is clear from Angelou's first poem, "Still I Rise" opens with the title of a resolution that she has the courage to rise up to the problems and challenges that she has to face as an African- American woman, citing "history" (Line 1) in the very first line and addressing the audience. her down. Within its nine stanzas, she has not clearly referred to her being an African-American woman but has given oblique reference to treatment meted out to her as a black woman. This comprises of insults, writing them down as referred in the first line, then "shoot me with your words" (Line 21) or looking at her with ironic or sarcastic eyes. However, her refrain of "I rise" coming at the end of each stanza and then repeated in the last stanza shows clearly how she has to cope with these strictures and come out of these social restrictions. However, compared to this, "Phenomenal Woman" gives Angelou as an African American woman having sense of identity.

This poem defines Angelou's identity as a black woman who has unique mysterious features that set her apart from other women per se (themselves), and she feels pride over them. The very first line tells that she is separate from "Pretty women" (Line 1) and that she is not pretty by society standards.

In other words, this is an indirect reference to her racial heritage that is African American. The second indirect reference comes in the second stanza where she says "and the flash of my teeth (Line 22) shows that her white teeth flash in her black face and that



makes her seem beautiful. Although there is no other direct response, it shows that she has consciousness of her being from the African-American is very clear.

As far as the first four stanzas of “Ain’t That Bad” are concerned, they are highly evocative about the African American community. The very first two stanzas tell about the dietary habits of the black community, while the second tells about the cosmetics and beautifying habits of the African American women such as given below in the first three stanzas.

Dancin' the funky chicken  
 Eatin' ribs and tips  
 Diggin' all the latest sounds  
 And drinkin' gin in sips.  
 Puttin' down that do-rag  
 Tighten' up my 'fro  
 Wrappin' up in Blackness  
 Don't I shine and glow?  
 Hearin' Stevie Wonder  
 Cookin' beans and rice  
 Goin' to the opera  
 Checkin' out Leontyne Price.” (Lines 1-12)

The third again talks about the food while the fourth talks about the best African-American women. As all of these things belong to the black race, Angelou gets the attention of her audiences and readers with questions of whether these are bad or not:

Now ain't they bad?

An ain't they Black?

An ain't they Black?

An' ain't they Bad?

An ain't they bad?

An' ain't they Black?

An' ain't they fine? (Lines 17-23)

The first question is about how beautiful black women are and the second is about black or the racial identity repeated by third and then sixth with the last one as “fine” (Line 23). The pride lurking in these questions has already been responded to in the first four stanzas that state the positive features of the African-American community. This shows that the poet is conscious of the rich heritage of her race. Then the sixth stanza is again of four lines, but these lines are highly ironic in their words which show that she has pride, but she also knows how people treat them. She is fully aware of her being black and that she is rather stated as resembling night or darkness.

In the poem, she turns to the great figures like Arthur Ashe, Mohammad Ali, Andre Watts, and Andrew Young to support her thesis that she has stated with interrogative sentences of assertion of goodness associated with black people. She then ends it with the usual phrase as in this stanza:

Arthur Ashe on the tennis court,

Mohammed Ali in the ring,

Andre Watts and Andrew Young,

Black men doing their thing. (Lines 33-36)

The next stanza ends with interrogative sentences to lead to the seven collective interrogatives which state that “Ain't we colorful folks?,” (Line 40) instead of black ones as given below:

Dressing in purples and pinks and greens,

Exotic as rum and Cokes,

Living our lives with flash and style,

Ain't we colorful folks? (Lines 37-40)

Related to racial empowerment, this poem starts with the first line of the praise for the acts that the African-American people have been identified with and that have given them a good name in the American society and ends with a question about the integrity and goodness of the African-American community. As a whole, this poem addresses the white audiences to make them realize that African-American community also has its own achievements.

The poem “Equality” is comprised of a refrain, “Equality and I will be free” after the long eight-line stanzas, followed by two four-line stanzas, a refrain and then again, the same pattern. The poem opens by addressing the audience directly by saying “You declare you see me dimly” (Line 1) where the word “dimly” is highly pointed and ironic that points to the black color. The first stanza paints the picture of a slave who is standing before his master who cannot see, hear, and judge him clearly due to his inborn bigotry. The refrain followed after this thematic strand gives a clear picture of what the African

American wants. The second stanza points to the stereotypical image that the media and the white society have created to represent the African-American community, but the next stanza immediately repairs this by pointing out the whole history that the African American has endured as she says,

We have lived a painful history,  
we know the shameful past,  
but I keep on marching forward,  
and you keep on coming last. (Lines 15-18)

The pluralistic tone does not reflect that this is only empowering of Angelou; she has rather taken the whole black community with her to state the painful history of slavery. This is empowering the whole community instead of only the individual. This is followed again by the same refrain of equality that is the desire of the whole community and not only of the individual. She knows that she would have to realize the tormentors and the masters and remind them that they need to shed their prejudice and “Take the blinders from your vision” (Line 21) to see that they, too, are human beings and they have also voice, life and rhythm like them. The poem ends on the same two lines of refrain that she has already given twice in the poem of the same title. Du Bois’ “double consciousness” seems to be at work here in these lines as they show her identity with respect to community and her own sense of self (08-09).

For racial empowerment, this poem reflects a view that Angelou has the desire to be free: “I will be free.” However, wherever she has engaged the white community addressing in second person, she used first person plural to represent her community.

Perhaps, this is a conscious effort on her part that the empowerment of the whole community is indirectly the empowerment of the females, and thus it is her empowerment, too. Angelou's empowerment has entered her next poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," which was recited at the inauguration of President Clinton in 1993. A producer of the Atlantic Channel, a television channel, Brian Rensick showered praises on her for this poem saying, "in it she honored the occasion and encapsulated the entirety of America's history—from the time of the dinosaurs to the struggles of Native Americans and African-Americans" (Rensick). He has also collected gems of wisdom showered by *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* on Maya Angelou and her charismatic rise and her status in the American racial divide.

With her apostrophic calls to natural objects like the rock, river, and tree, Maya Angelou has narrated the whole history of the black people. The long blank verse poem reverberates with the echoes of the voice of the rock which says, "I will give you no hiding place down here" (Lines 13). The river sings the song of the equality; the tree she has mentioned is a symbol of hope and peace as it says that all mankind is the same"

The singing river and the wise rock.

So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,

The African and Native American, the Sioux,

The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,

The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,

The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher. (Lines 41-46)

These are the words of the tree that call all the nations to take room with the tree that turns to the river and the rock which are all the natural objects. This poem of the praise of nature is encouraging in that it asks the African-American community to “Lift up your hearts” (Line 65) to give hope and freedom through the invocation of Midas and mendicant which could relieve the African-American community from the pains and tortures of inequality. Almost the same expression is found in “Million Man March,” a poem that ends with the same happy note. This is a quite unusual and unconventional poem that laments days of slavery and demands civil rights for the black people. The poem again starts with the same invocation to racial discrimination with the word “night” (Line 1), which signifies not only the bad conditions but also the black color. Issa Radhi of Basra University stated in her criticism of this poem that “she [Maya Angelou] has a gift of observing her environment and portraying vividly the life that she and the Afro-Americans have endured. She is as a critical judge of the Afro-Americans and she reflects their misery and misfortune in an intimate way in her poetry” (28). This means that her poem “Million March Man” has awakened the audiences across the world.

The poem has a total of eight stanzas of not equal lines as first has four, while the second has seven. The poem reminds the reader of the past days when slavery existed, and the African-American community was faced with racial discrimination. The females of the African-American community were raped and maltreated as she says “I was dragged by my braids...” (Line 65). During those days when both men and women suffered the most as she says:

Your hands were tied, your mouth was bound,  
You couldn't even call out my name.  
You were helpless and so was I,  
But unfortunately throughout history  
You've worn a badge of shame. (Lines 7-11)

In these lines Angelou speaks about how the whole community suffered during those times, and black men used to hide their shame of looking at their women being raped in front of their eyes as a “badge of shame” (Line 11). This discrimination is again repeated in the next stanza and then compared with the current situation which states that the situation is not that bad, but the old generation has paid for the freedom of the new generation.

However, at the same time, Angelou says that the situation is not good either and that she now asks her community to get together to win freedom, adding that though history is replete with pain, she repeats the same words of the poem “Still I Rise” with the addition of a conjunction and first person plural to say “And still we rise” which shows that she prefers the rise of the community instead of the individual. This again is a sense of empowerment throughout the poem that reverberates in the words and gives her strength to write boldly. Surprising, she opens her next poem, “The Black Family Pledge,” with the same strain, saying that the black community has forgotten the old generation “Because we have forgotten our ancestors/our children no longer give us honor” (Lines 1-2).

The poem has repeated the same thing idea the African-American community has forgotten the past, their forefathers, their sacrifices, their golden traditions, their lamentations, their wisdom and their good old ways. However, what Angelou laments the most is that African Americans have also forgotten how to love as she says, "BECAUSE we have forgotten how to love, the adversary is within our gates, and holds us up to the mirror of the world shouting, 'Regard the loveless'" (Lines 12-15). This shows as Bloom has stated that Maya Angelou considers courage as a very important virtue as has been given here (52).

Therefore, it is, she says, high time that the new generation should make a pledge that it should come together for the improvement of the whole community, for equality, for education, for removal of poverty and for brotherhood because "We are our brothers and sisters" (Line 20) adding that this should be attributed to old generation. In a way, this is pride that she feels, and this is the pride that has empowered her so much so that she has recited her previous poem.

In brief, almost all of her poems reveal Maya Angelou's faith in black people and her belief in humanity. Her poems, although centered around the experiences of black peoples are relevant to people around the world.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Maya Angelou's works revealed her interest in gender empowerment and racial empowerment. She achieved this through exploring the conditions of African Americans, and she sought to give voice to "voiceless people." Angelou was a spokesperson for people whose voices and experiences have not been heard. Therefore, she is a literary champion for African Americans and also for other people in America and throughout the world. In brief, Maya Angelou will always be remembered for her endless passion, inspirational words, and impactful actions.

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