

# "I'm a Woman Phenomenally": Black Women Empowerment in Selected Poems of Maya Angelou

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## ABSTRACT

As an African American female writer, Maya Angelou depicts the strength and power of black women and protests the misconceptions and the prejudice of the white. Black women are perceived by the white to be less smart and attractive than the white. Although, Angelou resists the mistaken stereotypes regarding black women to be ugly and weak. In her poems, Angelou presents strong and confident black women who can stand for their rights and be, at least, as equal as to the white women. She is a great defender and supporter of women's rights. The fact that she is a black woman makes the study deeper as her poems present an oppressed woman and a subjugated black person who disallows the inequalities and stands up for her rights. Thus, this paper, through a multiracial-feminist theory, attempts to scrutinize Angelou's "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman" which reflect the empowerment of black women.

**Keywords:** Black women, Empowerment, Maya Angelou, *Phenomenal Woman*, *Still I Rise*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Until women achieve their basic rights all over the world, gender and racial issues are going to be heated debates. Although women of most of the countries are freer than others in the developing countries, they are still struggling and fighting their battles of gender and racial inequalities. Feminism is a broader term than it has been perceived by the common people. Feminists work to achieve social justice for women. This reestablishment can be in all aspects, physically, psychologically, economically, politically and ultimately socially. The feminists attempt to build a society where both men and women are equally treated.

In this study, one of the leading poets, activists and feminists is tackled, Maya Angelou. One of the factors which makes the choice of Angelou unique is that she has personally suffered from gender imbalances in her life. Besides, female figures permeate her poems. She acknowledges that women should not be the mere object of child production; they should rather be useful and effective beings though she values women's full-time job as a mother. Angelou gives voice to the demands of those who have been voiceless for so long. Black American women want to be freed of all sufferings and subjugation, as evidenced by Angelou's term "to rise" (Suhadi, 2016).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have studied Maya Angelou's poetry from various angles. The suffering of black women and their being discriminated are two of the common topics that have been tackled (Munawaroh and Paturohmah 53). Other researchers such as Sylvania Krisna and Liliek Soelistyo Krisna have emphasized on black empowerment in Angelou's selected poems but they have presented black power as "the way to survive in the society" (2013, 94). My focus, nevertheless, is on the concept of black women's empowerment as a racial empowerment.

Regarding the methodology, multiracial-feminist theory is a smart choice as Angelou's poems portray black women's empowerment and the stereotypes of the black women which are forced upon by the white. The paper begins with an overview of multiracial-feminist views and a summary of Maya Angelou's style. Then, two poems of Maya Angelou are tackled, "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman". The image of female figures in her poems is portrayed. The last part of the study is the conclusion that sums up the main findings of the study followed by the works cited.

### 3. AN OVERVIEW OF MULTIRACIAL-FEMINIST VIEWS

Multiracial feminism, which originated in the 1970s and was driven by women of color from America, relates justice for women directly to the desire to consider how race works as a powerhouse related to gender inequality and other forms of repression. The notion that all women have the same backgrounds, multiracial feminism leads the discourse on racism, colonialism, imperialism and sexism, which problematize modern feminism's principle of gender unity. In the theory of gender oppression, multiracial feminists centralize ethnic stratification. Multiracial feminists, also known as feminists from the Third World, recognize that the cultures, genders and nations are fluid, thereby create transnational, cultural and multicultural alliances based on a collective struggle against the oppression of race, class and gender (Zinn and Dill, 1996).

Multiracial feminism most often refers to the feminisms of Black/African American, Latina/Chicana, Native American and Asian American women, but contains those of anti-racist white females and women of all colors, including East Indian, Arab, mixed-race, and colorless women. In certain cases, multiracial feminists have defined themselves as "color women," who are a comparatively new phenomenon to be described as a group of political, strategic and subjective identification. The expression "females of color" refers to the affinity and resemblance of their experience (Ritzer, 2007, 3117).

In the early 1970s, a number of feminist women of color in America started claiming the word "third-world women" to show a relationship with women of color all over the world and their contribution to postcolonial struggles. The phrase was used by Third World women as a deliberate relation to concerns not discussed by many white feminists. Black activists have challenged White upper-class or working women domination in the movement that has been incorrectly labeled as "Feminism" over consecutive generations. White women have typically been seen as the movement's spokespersons, which hide the reality of women in the Third World, African American community, and lower classes. (Chilla, 1991).

Women of color have engaged actively in the problems of women. Their expertise on feminist work have been neglected and largely undocumented. In other words, although black feminist greatly contributed to all the three waves of feminism, yet their contributions were overlooked by the white feminists. Multiracial feminism is a booming region centered on women's voices but with the writings of anti-racist, white, non-American, progressive, and energetic women. Understanding the intersections of oppression to encourage harmony between the various races, genders and nations is a key element of multiracial feminism (Thomson, 2002).

### 4. THE POET: MAYA ANGELOU

The American poet, singer, memoirist, and civil rights activist Marguerite Annie Johnson (Maya Angelou) was born April 4, 1928 and died May 28, 2014. She has written seven autobiographies, three essay books, many poetry books and is recognized with a list of plays, movies and television shows spanning over 50 years. She won hundreds of awards and over 50

honorary certificates. In the late 1950s, she was a member of the Harlem Writers Guild, participated in the Civil Rights Movement, and worked as the Northern Director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Dr. Martin Luther King. She has performed a unique role in the hearts of readers all over the world. Joanne Braxton listed Maya Angelou as "America's most visible black women autobiographer" (1999, 4).

Maya Angelou faced so many struggles in her life starting from the day she was born. She talks about her life and the struggles she has been born into through her poems and books. When Angelou was three years old, her parents got divorced. Her father sent her and her brother to live with her grandmother in Stamps, like the one she describes in her autobiography "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", "Our parents had decided to put an end to their disastrous marriage, and Father shipped us home to his mother. We lived with our grandmother and uncle in the back of the Store (it was always spoken of with a capital S), which she had owned for around twenty-five years" (Angelou, 1969, 3).

Her ability to tell stories is characterized by insight and laughter as she demonstrates to the reader with often difficult yet truthful frankness. Angelou's memoirs promote faith against suffering and show the human spirit's endurance. Through her writing skills, she is telling the story of her people. Although Angelou is keenly aware of the traumatic past of her community, which is a history of the elite or White America in which Black people have a very limited presence. Black-Americans rarely view themselves as they are, but rather through the eyes of White people, and as a result, they frequently experience the pull of two opposing cultures: the African culture to which they belong and the American culture toward which their goals are ideologically oriented (Lupton, 1990).

The poems of Angelou are a series of emotions and moods. They range from romantic joy to racial injustice, from pride of blackness and African ancestry to suffered slurs. Angelou is adopting the literary viewpoint of Countee Cullen that black writers have the right "to do, to publish, to create what we want, our only concern is that we do so well and with all our strength." Angelou indeed speaks out in many ways and with the best of words she can summon. Angelou's poetry is usually brief as Langston Hughes' style who believed a poem should be short and precise (Hagen, 1997, 118).

Maya Angelou's surroundings, condition and life did not collaborate with her being a creative writer, however, she improved her skills and proved herself to be a profound voice. She will not have life bested her, as she asserts, "All my work, my life, everything is about survival. All my work is meant to say, 'You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated'" (Braxton, 1999, 154). Her miserable life had become her inspiration to inspire and empower many women around the world, black women in particular.

Given the above clarifications, the female figures in the poetry of Angelou are worth a deep study to be conducted to show the ways in which she has sympathized, celebrated, supported, defended, and encouraged black women for their rights. The aim of this study is to show the ways in which the black female figures are presented in Angelou's poetry positively and powerfully. I am focusing on the qualities of strong black women in her selected poems and the ways she has demonstrated the voices of black women. Such voices are not merely to demonstrate the pain of the black women but to celebrate their strength and distinctiveness.

## 5. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN ANGELOU'S SELECTED POEMS

As mentioned earlier, Maya Angelou's poetry is loaded with the portrayal of women, especially women of color. The African Americans are under numerous threats. Angelou is still concerned about the subjugation of Black women, who are frequently the targets of sexism and racism. Racism is the indiscriminate treatment of a group of people by another; in American society, Black people are seen as less cultured, uncouth, and inferior to White people,

who are seen as the pinnacle of civilization, supremacy, and beauty. The repressive ideology of sexism, on the other hand, denigrates women by placing them below the status of men. The foundation of sexism is gender bias, which either explicitly or secretly works to maintain the subordination of women. There are two of Maya Angelou's poems to be discussed in this study. The poems are "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman" that were both written during the second feminism wave, the 1960s.

### 5.1 "Still I Rise"

"Still I Rise" was published in 1978, and one of Maya Angelou's great poems. This poem is made up of nine stanzas. All stanzas are arranged in four lines except for the last two stanzas. It has a rhyme scheme of "abcb" (Bloom, 2001). "Still I Rise" is about black people living among the whites. This is often the case that a second wave of feminism tackles in the 1960s. At that period, the black women voiced their demands, as feminists claim that colored women are treated cruelly, harshly and disproportionately by all races (white and black) males and white females. In addition, they address them as uncivilized.

The "I" in "Still I Rise" is intended by Angelou herself to be a female. She talks not only of herself but also about her gender and race. Angelou's autobiographies and protest poetry extend that development to herself. Furthermore, Angelou implies that the black race is not only persistent but, in Sondra O Neale's words, "there will be the triumph of a desire of collective knowledge which the west cannot extinguish." The most militant poems of Angelou are contained in the second part of her first volume of poetry. In her moving address "To a freedom fighter," Angelou, again as a representative of all the black people, acknowledges a debt due to those who fought earlier fighting on civil rights. They have got "a bit more... the often sardonic expression of a black in the white-dominated world" (Hagen, 1997, 128).

"Still I Rise" begins with a challenge that the speaker states she would never give up and she will progress to her and other black women for better lives: "You may write me down in history/With your bitter, twisted lies/You may trod me in the very dirt/But still, like dust, I'll rise"(Angelou,1994, lines 1-4). The history of the black is loaded with inequality and suppression. Evidently, the white is the source of this discrimination. The introductory lines are striking descriptions of the confidence of the black.

The first pronoun the readers are introduced to is "you." Throughout reading the poem, the identity of the collective "you" becomes apparent. This tells us that no matter what happens. I (the speaker) will rise. Angelou conveys the message that men and women are equal and they have equal positions. She believes that women should enjoy social, legal, and intellectual equalities along with men. It is interesting how the speaker challenges all the people who want to deform the personalities and the essence of her by writing about her in history as "bitter, twisted lies." The challenge does not end here, it rather extends to physical torturing even if they "trod" her "in the very dirt," it would not be an obstacle for her to rise up. Feminist empowerment is profoundly significant as no obstacles can stop women from achieving their goals and reaching their destinations.

In the second stanza, the poet asks a rhetorical question and she answers in the same stanza. The speaker poses a question to the previously mentioned "you." The question is if the speaker's high spirit bothers "you." She also wonders why the addressed "you" is overwhelmed with gloomy feelings about her. She mentions the reason is her value as she walks like she has got "oil wells." This materialistic image symbolizes the power and strength of the speaker that she is as precious as "oil wells." This line signifies the life and prosperity of the poet and all the individuals that she exemplifies.

In the third stanza, she combines natural elements to describe her strength: "Just like moons and like suns, /With the certainty of tides,/Just like hopes springing high,/Still I'll rise"

(Angelou, 1994, lines 9-12). According to Clark, a simile is, "a sentence expressing a similarity of relations between things unlike in kind" (2010, 149). Angelou uses simile to compare her strength to the "moons, "suns." It can be noticed that there is only one moon and sun in the universe, but Angelou's power extends beyond natural powers and she has more than one moon and sun, this denotes her infinite power. She then reflects her confidence by comparing her self-reliance to "the certainty of tides." In line 11, she explicitly mentions the word "hopes" to show the certainty that she will "rise."

The fourth stanza is a combination of four questions which are again addressed to the inclusive "you." The speaker lists the wishes of the people who wanted to see her "broken", "bowed head", "lowered eyes", "shoulders falling down" and "soulful cries." She lists them in a form of questions. She predicts the wishes of the people to see her weak, passive, submissive and shattered. In the fifth stanza, she brings another example to symbolize her power that is "gold mines." She states that she is cheerful and "laughing."

She then repeats the same pattern of the first stanza to compose the sixth stanza. Maya Angelou is not a fantasized lady, she is a realistic lady. She foresees the harshness she may face as a woman, but she is not to be smashed. She depicts an impossible condition to break her down, no matter what might be done to her, she "will rise" and she proves to be indestructible. People may mock her, comment on her physicality and her life might be covered with the wrath she receives from others, but still she will stand up:" You may shoot me with your words, /You may cut me with your eyes, /You may kill me with your hatefulness,/But still, like air, I'll rise"(Angelou, 1994, lines 21-24).

She starts asking questions again in the seven stanzas but this time she describes her bodily and physical beauty as a means of her empowerment. Angelou wonders if her gender is bothering and comes as a "surprise" to the haters of the speaker. But the truth is, no matter how much hate she receives, she is still pursuing her skills "That I dance like I've got diamonds"(Angelou, line 27). This simile compares her strength and beauty to that of a "diamond." A diamond is highly treasured and wanted by almost everyone. That is why she describes herself as a unique being.

It is only in the eighth stanza, one before the last, the readers understand that the collective "I" of the speaker represents the voices of the female black women: "Out of the huts of history's shame/I rise/Up from a past that's rooted in pain/I rise/I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,/Welling and swelling I bear in the tide" (Angelou, 1994, lines 29-34). The black people and black women, in particular, were discriminated against throughout "history." They do not have a joyful "past." The black ancestors had gone through endless "pain." However, none of the stated miseries have obliged the black to surrender and to bow. She admits that she belongs to the black race "I'm a black ocean" (Angelou, 1994, line 33). It is from the ashes that she will "rise", it is from the anguish of the past that a stronger black woman will "rise."

Finally, Maya Angelou claims that she will become rebellious against the pain and oppression of black women. She is not determined to permit society to hate them. She does not allow agony to stop her from becoming all that she wants to become or fulfill her dreams. That is the reason why she repeats "I rise" continually in the final stanza. Maya Angelou describes a new beginning in which she will not be merely obsessed with what had happened in the past. She would rather leave it all behind "Leaving behind nights of terror and fear" (Angelou, line 35), and fight toward suffering and oppression "to a beautifully simple break of the day" (Angelou, 1994, line 37). She does not give up and she is a fighter that is why she repeats "I rise" five times.

Towards the end of the poem, the poet confirms what she has been trying to convey since the first stanza. One can anticipate the resistance she provides by insisting on "I Rise." Ultimately, "Still I Rise" introduces black women as leaders and challenges the structure of the society with relation to the black people. In her youth, Maya Angelou has not experienced love

but has been independent of her experiences. Not many would support the freedom of a woman as a teenager but Angelou remained strong in her beliefs. Although the brutal history of black women who were subjugated is clearly shown in "Still I Rise" but she also illustrates the society and defies the stereotypes that women cannot maintain a productive and independent life for themselves.

## 5.2 "Phenomenal Woman"

"Phenomenal Woman" was published in 1978. This poem has four stanzas. The poem concerns colored women who live with the whites. Maya Angelou tries to deliver a message to the reader through her poem to value themselves even if they are not physically celebrated as perfect and attractive. As political activism has grown since the 1960s, Black women have begun to become more aware of their rights as newly empowered women. Thus, black women started to convey their pain and delight, frustration and aspiration, in their own way.

According to the mentality of the white, black women do not fit into the standards of the white due to their skin complexions. Like women of other cultures, they are exceptional. Even though white women ask why the African American women are beautiful, the writer bravely suggests that African American women have inner beauty, which is their distinction. They are confident saying that they have a lovely black body and an interesting look. In other terms, among evaluating oneself, African Americans have positive values. During the time this poem was composed, more black people raised their voices because feminists believed that colored women are behaved harshly and brutally, as opposed to black and white males and white women and they are being treated for intolerance and prejudice.

Colored women in the U.S.A have been mistreated and have the same struggles and difficulties residing in the culture with gender and racial discriminations. Maya Angelou as a poet portrays a confident and great woman as a black. The reader recognizes that every line of the poem portrays Maya Angelou, as the voice of the black woman, as a self-possessed woman for being black and she is proud of her body. All stanzas begin with a description of the condition of the poet or how people are treating her.

Black writers of the late 20th century have written about the celebration of black skin. A good example of observation is "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou. By embracing her black beauty, Angelou challenges the conventional wisdom that only women with fair complexion are attractive. She refers to herself as a "phenomenal woman," yet she is a stunning woman regardless of whether the White confirms her attractiveness or not. The word "phenomenal" is defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* as "extraordinary", "outstanding" (Soukhanov et al, 1994). The title of Maya Angelou's poem indicates a positive and powerful notion. Only after reading the first stanza, it becomes clear what she means by the word phenomenal: "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" (Angelou, 1994, lines 1-4).

Maya Angelou who is also the speaker of the poem states that she is black and flawless. She is complete as well an extraordinary woman. In the first stanza, the poem begins by reflecting that the writer does not belong to the beautiful type of what the society demands. It can be inferred that the people who ask about the speaker's "secret" of beauty are white women since they are known to be more glamorous social status particularly in the former American society "pretty women." Then the narrator reacts to her wonder that she is confident in the way she moves her body, her manner of walking, her hips' movement and her smile. The irony lies in the fact that the white women question the speaker, yet they perceive her response as "lies." The speaker considers herself to be extraordinary astonishing.

She lists a number of her body characteristics including arms, hips, steps and lips. Angelou

contrasts the standard beauty of women to be slim, with small hips and thin lips. She presents an entirely different description of the appearance criterion and still, she seems to be splendid: "It's in the reach of my arms,/The span of my hips,/The stride of my step,/The curl of my lips" (Angelou, 1994, lines 6-9).

The above stanza shows the reader that even if she does not have a slim, good-looking and typical body who can wear a fashionable dress, she is confidently, strongly and courageously black. Her confidence and courage have made her a beautiful and phenomenal woman. The black women whose physical qualities were of, "dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair," considered to be inferior and ugly (Collins, 2000, 89).

The speaker persists in the same spirit in the second stanza as well. The poet explains the reason that why people "swarm" like "bees" is that black women have lovely eyes, teeth, waist and feet. The metaphor "A hive of honey bees" (Angelou, line 20) and "I walk into a room/just as cool as you please" (Angelou, lines 14-15) demonstrate that African American women have a strong sense of self-confidence. While the white still look at them negatively, they always have confidence that people love and "swarm" around them. They can also move and do just as equable as the whites do. The phenomenal woman symbol further reflects the high confidence of African American people, since not all women are able to identify themselves as a phenomenal woman. However, African American women confidently depend on their unique features to be phenomenal.

In the third stanza, men's curiosities are shown why they like the type of woman as the narrator. It is because of her inner mystery that the writer addresses, which they cannot see. It is also due to her lovely "back...eyes...breast...clothing." Men endeavor to reach the beauty of black women, "They try so much/But they can't touch" (Angelou, 1994, lines 32-33). Maya Angelou shows that men try to understand why black women are self-assured to take these kinds of extreme actions, but that they do not understand the cause of the confidence. The metaphors of "the sun of my smile" (Angelou, 1994, line 39) and "it's the fire in my eyes" (Angelou, 1994, line 22) demonstrate that the women of African American realize what their powers are hidden and cannot be seen by superficial men. Black women realize that no matter what tough statements people might say to them, they always believe that they have something positive and that is their uniqueness.

She concludes the poem with more images of empowered black women who do not stoop to the white. They are strong and proud women whose "heads" are "not bowed." The fact that they do not stoop, reflects their self-importance. She lists more physical qualities to add to her strength, beauty and pride including her "heels...hair...palm...hair."

As a black woman, Maya Angelou describes her positive point of view. In the last stanza, the narrator says she does not want to be embarrassed, feel unconfident as the speaker discovers that all women are phenomenal and have their beauty. Once again, she says she is proud of her heels, her hair, her hand and her care. Through learning what each stanza implies, it is possible to know that this poem represents a woman who is proud of herself even if she is not viewed as attractive according to society. Angelou often sought to change the perception and concept of women's beauty in society, particularly in American society because being beautiful is not only seen from the physical appearance of women or the standard of beauty in society but tends to be extracted from one's inner goodness.

Interestingly, the poet acts as the narrator as she uses the pronoun "I" in all the last four lines of each stanza, she states, "I am a woman/ phenomenally. /Phenomenal woman, / that's me." However, "I" signifies "us," as a collective voice. In other words, Angelou not only hopes to share her experience but also, she is the representative of the voice of African American women in general.

One of the effective literary elements that the poet uses in both poems is repetition. The repetition of a line or few lines indicates emphasis on the idea in the repeated lines. As Cuddon

explains, "repetition is an essential unifying element in nearly all poetry and much prose. It may consist of sound, syllables and word, phrases, stanzas, metrical patterns, ideas, allusions and shapes" (2013, 602).

All the imageries of the poem show that African American women are appreciative and proud to have come into being as African American women with dark skins. She uses poetry to show how racism and sexism both work together to silence the voices of women of color. In addition to exposing how sexism and racism operate as repressive systems, Angelou's poetry also challenges them. Hence, they fight against oppression by recognizing their strength and extraordinariness, which can be appealing to others.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman" give black women the inspiration of doing something different, to have a new understanding of thought, and to be assured that they will not be misunderstood, marginalized and that they will have a better life to live with gender equality. She, as her entire race, has gone through depression, discouragement and disappointment. However, in her poems, the message of revival, strength and empowerment are conveyed openly. The goal of Maya Angelou is not only to accomplish liberation from the oppressive world and become a writer but to extend equality to all kinds of people regardless of color and gender. Angelou fights against the misconceptions that black women are weak, dependent, and ugly. She rather describes the African American women to be strong, independent and beautiful.



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