

## Maya Angelou's quest for an identity as a female black voice

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**Abstract:** The black female writers who have made a significant contribution to African American Literature knew that it was necessary to tell their stories which were influential in their struggle against the forces of domination in the American canon. Although Angelou's poetry has a large public, it does not have the deserved esteem. This article explores the fact that Angelou, through her outstanding poems, illustrates the black female voice and expresses her criticism of discrimination and injustice. Meanwhile, she tries to create a culture to celebrate the notion that Black subject is beautiful and unique.

[Leila Naderi, Azita Amelirad, Shiva Amelirad. **Maya Angelou's quest for an identity as a female black voice.** *Researcher* 2013;5(12):228-231]. (ISSN: 1553-9865). <http://www.sciencepub.net/researcher>. 32

**Key words:** African American poetry; recreating black identity; female voice

### 1. Introduction

Many generations of black people have had to cope with oppression and injustice within the dominant white society of the United States. They had to learn how to survive in the most difficult conditions. The route towards liberation was not easy and many black people encountered lots of defeats and losses. An expression of antisexism in the 70s and the 80s was emerged by black feminist theory whose main feature is its criticism of the male centered society. It not only condemned "the racism of white, including white feminists, but also, and most important, the sexism of both white and black male" (8, Napier). Black feminist criticism brought a sense of understanding to black women's art; as Barbara Smith claims that "without a black feminist critical perspective not only are books by black women misunderstood, they are destroyed in the process". (Smith, 141)

Black women have experienced due to their sex and race double oppression and need more energy to recover from their bizarre and tough conditions and it is the reason that black women activists claim womanism and feminism are quite distinct from each other. In fact, every black female writer deals with both racism and sexism.

Hence, almost all literary works of Black American women seem to share some common themes relevant to their distinct condition. Kanneh claims that "one step for black feminism is to increase awareness among white feminists of the States of affairs which black women can never sweep from their mind" (Kanneh, 150). The traumas which have been experienced by black people in history cannot be erased. Sherley Anne Williams, as many other critics claim, argues that "black women's literary experiences were excluded from consideration in the literature of white feminists" (Williams, 219).

### 2. African American women poets

Alice Walker's search to restore the voice of Zora Neale Hurston in her *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* was probably an important landmark to discover unacknowledged little-known black women whose anonymity is due to their race and gender. Thanks to researches like Walker's, once marginalized by mainstream America, African American women now have a central voice and play an essential role in American culture. This new voice was a reaction to pervaded stereotypical black women characters being formed and presented in white canon. Black women's stress on self-definition, self-awareness and the necessity of loving oneself are among the most recurrent motifs during the second part of the twentieth century. Among African American women writers, many have demonstrated their experiences in the power of poetic language. Poetry has been vital as a means of self-expression and artistic production. Keith D. Leonard in his article, 'African American women poets and the power of the word' asserts that poetry for African American women is not an aesthetic object "because this act of speaking, of naming one's own reality, has been an act of self-assertion as important as protests, lawsuits, and marches for redefining how African American women live in American society" (Leonard, 169).

However, he continues that what matters about Black women's poetry is how they used poetry to represent the complexity of their lives.

The present article explores Maya Angelou's poetry as an illustration of empowered black women despite the reality of violence and segregation. Angelou's poetry has brought a sensitivity and insight to the work that is distinctly Black and female. As a result, the role and the voice of Black women have been focused of her poems. It is not surprising that many of Angelou's poems deal with the theme of

social and political injustice at work and in the lives of black people as it is, for instance, in 'Harlem Hopscotch':

*In the air, now both feet down.*

*Since you black, don't stick around.*

*Food is gone, the rent is due,*

*Curse and cry and then jump two (Angelou, 51, 1994)*

Seemingly, it is a simple children's rhyme. However, upon a careful reading, it is clearly a strict criticism on the plight of African Americans as members of a society that oppresses and excludes them. Its deceptively simple language explores the ideas of poverty and race relations. The social situation makes the poet hopeless. In 'America', for instance, which opens with "The gold of her promise/ has never been mined" (85) which is also a strong protest against racial injustice, the poet illustrates the harsh reality of discrimination against minority:

*Her southern exposure*

*black death did befriend (85)*

She expresses hopelessness and sadness of the starved mothers who pray to saints for help and miracles: "The plastered saints gazing down / beneficently / on kneeling mothers", but who receive none, while they are "picking undigested beans/ from yesterday's shit".

### 3. Maya Angelou's distinct voice

Being subject to the horrible rape at age seven, Maya Angelou suffered from a self-imposed silence for more than five years. She states: "From the time I was 7½ until I was almost 13, I didn't talk. I was persuaded to talk by a woman who knew I loved and memorized poetry" (Toppman 142).

In fact, it was her creative writing and poetry specifically, that brought back her voice. However, her poetry has been overshadowed by her outstanding autobiographies and memories which brought her international recognition and acclaim. Although many critics believe that Angelou is more adept at prose than verse, it is reading her poetry through a white canon viewpoint that has led its long term ignorance. Angelou has published six volumes of poetry: *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die* (1971), *Oh, Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975), *And Still I Rise* (1978), *Shaker Why Don't You Sing* (1983), *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987) and *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990). Much of Angelou's poetry expresses themes common to the life experiences of many African American women. All images of black women in her poetry share some common features among which their resistance might be most outstanding.

An outstanding poem in her first volume of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water*, which

was nominated for Pulitzer Prize is *When I Think About Myself*. Angelou in this poem and many other poems from the second part of this volume turns her attention to the distinctive issues of black people in America. In this poem one can simultaneously notice the voices of the poet, a created persona and the black community in general. 'When I Think About Myself' is about an old woman thinking about herself and looking back on the ironies of her life. "When I think about myself,/ I almost laugh myself to death,/ My life has been one great big joke" (Angelou, 29). The second stanza reveals the speaker's position in a discriminatory atmosphere; an old black woman who has been treated in a degrading way by addressing her as a child.

*Sixty years in these folks' world*

*The child I works for call me girl*

*I say "Yes ma'am" for working sake. (29)*

She feels that her life is incomplete and has never been fulfilled. This impression is given by her saying:

"A dance that's walked [instead of danced], / A song that's speaking [instead of sung]". Although she is subjected to unfair indignities, she is "too proud to bend". In the third stanza her "self" shifts to her "folks" who have had similar experience of exploitation and discrimination; "They grow the fruit/ But are allowed to eat only the rind". The speaker's ironic reaction to the hopeless experiences is 'laughing' which plays as a defense mechanism to alleviate her suffering and it also prevents her from losing her energy and will. In this poem Angelou concentrates on the use of irony and she emphasizes on the liberating power of laughter as a profound impact on black people. The poem also presents a paradoxical position of Black people who were trapped between two sides, two identities. On one side they were Civil rights movement supporters and on the other side they had to play obedient servants to survive "I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake/Too proud to bend".

Another well-known poem that reveals the speaker's longing for freedom is her 'Caged Bird'. The bird's struggling for freedom stands for the black community's wrestling with their barrier as a black community. The poet is explaining the feelings of racial discrimination, segregation, and domination. Among other meaning 'the caged bird' can be interpreted as the black race being held back from freedom. Unlike 'the free bird' it suffers from its unfulfilled dreams; "But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams/ his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream/ his wings are clipped and his feet are tied" (195). However the last stanza is implying that even though this bird is trapped, it still has hope, since it

*"sings of freedom".*

*The caged bird sings*

*With a fearful trill  
Of things unknown  
But longed for still  
And his tune is heard  
On the distant hill  
For the caged bird  
Sings of freedom (195)*

#### 4. Theme of identity

Identity, both as individual and collective phenomena, has been one of the most provocative themes for African American female writers. Angelyn Mitchel and Danille K. Taylor believe that black women writers “sought to understand the self in relation to society, historically and politically, as well as the interior self, often through personal experiences, like motherhood and marriage” (Mitchel, 8).

Angelou portrays a hopeful life for all including black community in the United States in her inaugural poem, “On the Pulse of Morning” by manifesting the present victorious empowerment of black people which is the consequence of their struggling resistance for emancipation.

History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.  
(*Complete Collected Poems*, 272)

Her naming of all the groups of people creates a quilt-like image out of minorities in the United States who have potentiality of living together peacefully. Despite the unending difficulty that her previous generation and the present black community have had, her poetry is full of references to the life-affirming values and courage of the African American community. “You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought,/ Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare,/ Praying for a dream” (272 )

Naming has been an important source of both individual and collective identity. Angelou’s ‘The Calling of Names’ which traces the history of the terms by which black people or African Americans have been called is a protest against the destructive impact of white oppressions on collective identity of African American people; “He went to being called a colored man/ after answering to "hey, nigger. / Now that's a big jump,/ anyway you nigger. / Hey, Baby, watch my smoke”. (*Complete Collected Poems*, 46). Although Angelou does not restrict herself to women’s issues and tries to deal with all black community’s concern, she is basically regarded as a womanist. Not surprisingly, an outstanding theme of many of her poems among which ‘Phenomenal Woman’ stands out is black women’s problems.

A distinctive feature of Angelou’s ethnic voice in lots of her poems is the fact that she not only expresses criticism of discrimination and injustice, but also

expresses a culture to celebrate. An outstanding poem in this view is her “Phenomenal Woman” from *And Still I Rise* in which the speaker of the poem says, repeatedly, that she’s a ‘phenomenal woman’.

Her norms for this phenomenal woman are not the typical thinness and attractiveness in women: “I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size” (*Complete Collected Poems*, 130).

As a reaction to societal expectation because women are expected to almost starve themselves in order to be considered ‘pretty’, the speaker is trying to convince herself that she is phenomenal and wonderful, worthy of the attention she’s getting.

In the second stanza Angelou portrays the female figure as dominant, as she describes men falling to a submissive position in her presence. She even compares the men who “swarm” around the speaker to “a hive of honey bees”. The speaker emphasizes on the physical and materialistic beauty of black female subjects which had been erased under dominant hegemony.

She is listing her phenomenal attributes, in much the same way a therapist usually try to encourage people list the things they liked about themselves. These things include arms, lips, “The span of my hips” and “The swing in my waist”—all of the things that make the speaker, a woman, who she is. The speaker tries to convey that a black woman has to redefine both her body and soul to revise the definitions that have been made for them till now

*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 (130)*

The speaker sings out her inner self to regain her erased identity as a black woman, though without claiming to be better than anyone else. She feels powerful, but not superior. The poem illustrates the charismatic personality of black femininity; “Men themselves have wondered/ What they see in me. /They try so much/ But they can’t touch/ My inner mystery” (131).

The woman described in the poem may be easily matched to not only the author herself but also many of female personality in black community. It can closely relate to the pride she has found by loving herself regardless of what the dominant culture creates out of her. The repetitions of certain terms reassure the reader that the person loves who she is. Through restating that she is a phenomenal woman the speaker forms her deserved identity.

“Still I Rise” is another powerful female voice. Angelou seems to be referring to herself as ‘I’. Perhaps, she is speaking to the white race as ‘you’. The poem is conveying the message that from the white perspective, whites are superior to blacks. The persona illustrates the image which has been formed by white hegemony “You may write me down in history/ With your bitter, twisted lies” (163) and then she attempts to revise and represent the true image of her as a black woman:

*Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room. (163)*

The speaker discovers a new self who stands opposite to the black female created by white culture. This speaker is not merely an individual. Rather she is an incarnation of black femininity; “I am the dream and the hope of the slave”. The reader can hear a more forceful voice in this poem in comparison to the “Caged Bird”

#### 5. Discussion:

Angelou’s literary work in general and her poetry specifically might be considered an effort to show black women seeking to survive against white masculine prejudice at social or psychological levels. Her poems are abundant with references to black women’s attempts to form and revise their real identities.

In general she advocates the urgent need for the creation of a truly humane society with greater respect for all its members. Generally, contemporary Black female authors in America both in poetry and fiction have commenced establishing their own voice through recreating and rewriting their identity. Thus the discourse created by African American has subverted the dominant monolithic discourse.

#### Acknowledgement:

Authors are grateful to the Islamic Azad University, Marivan Branch, Kurdistan, for financial support to carry out this work.

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12/12/2013