

## Maya Angelou — A Writer Who Poetically Dares to Defy Racism

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### Abstract

*Literatures of colored people have received less attention in the White world till late twentieth-century. As the Black Power Movement gained momentum in the United States, great pieces of art start appearing on the literary scene. This article presents how a segregated class protests against the suffocating injustice present in the American society through poetry. It is a protest through aesthetics in a world whose boundaries are set by the Whites. The Whites enjoy the central position in the society while those surviving on the boundaries have no access to policy and law making of the country. Maya Angelou strongly defies rigid institutional racist prejudice through jazzy compositions. The language used in the poems might appear innocent, but the way in which the language is used to suggest intricate ideas is rather complex. Creating poems is an effort on the part of the writer to take an affirmative action against anti-racist culture.*

**Keywords:** Blacks; injustice; oppression; race; Whites

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*There is a strange kind of tragic enigma associated with the problem of racism. No one, or almost no one, wishes to see themselves as racist; still, racism persists, real and tenacious.*

Albert Memmi, *Racism*.

### 1. Introduction

Generations of black people dealt with oppression and injustice within the dominant white society of the United States. They have strained to survive in the most difficult conditions. The road towards liberation has been very demanding as uncountable black people encountered countless defeats and losses. Black men fought against racism and classism but black women

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have to fight on three grounds: racism, classism, and sexism—all three at the same time. Their condition was worse than black men. African-American female authors have to redefine their image of submissive beings which is only fit for non-creative and monotonous house-hold chores. They illustrated that a black woman struggles for her identity and sacrifices for herself, family, and race. Naderi et al say, “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” (2013, 228). Using subtle notes of poetry, they question racial oppression with defiance.

Maya Angelou is one such multi-dimensional personality who, since childhood till her death, actively participated against racial oppression. She is such a person whom one cannot ignore as she enjoyed a significant position in literary and cultural scenario of the United States during the last five decades. About her grandeur, in foreword to *Maya Angelou: A Glorious Celebration*, Oprah Winfrey writes, “She fully inhabits and owns every space of herself with no pretense and no false modesty. She has a certain way of being in this world. When you walk into a room and she’s there, you know it. She is fully aware of what it means to be human, and share that humanity with others. Being around her makes you want to do the same, be more fully your own self” (Gillespie, 2008, 1). Growing up in a segregated, racist South where “That new classroom where/Boys all pull my hair” (“Life Doesn't Frighten Me”, 28-29) and *powhitetrash* often gather outside elementary schools to scream racial slurs at black children, Angelou learns the value of personal dignity in seemingly despairing spells. Talking about the resilience of black woman, Angelou writes in her essay “They Came to Stay” that black women in the United States have lived through cruel and horrible conditions. Through this stressful phenomenon, these women have tried to release their torture by finding solace and sacredness inside themselves. They have had to learn to forgive, to be real to themselves and, to bear life’s difficulties. According to Angelou, black women are surprisingly and undeniably strong and unapologetically direct. For this reason, black women are worthy of admiration (8-9).

## 2. Literature Review

The life and work of Maya Angelou can be called mirror images as they accurately reflect each other. Angelou's poetry and autobiographical fiction present a wider canvas wherein the symbolic Maya Angelou emerges to become a voice of consciousness for African-American people, especially black women who are struggling to survive amid masculine prejudice, in addition to the hatred of Whites for blacks. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an autobiographical work which has attracted attention of critical readership and earned fame and respect for Maya Angelou. Her autobiographical novels are widely read and taught in educational institutions. As compared to novels, Angelou's poetry has received less attention. This led me to fill in the research gap to analyze some poems of Angelou which she writes using simple language conveying weighty messages.

## 3. Methodological Issues

Knowledge of language is used to analyze and interpret the text. It is a process-based methodology which inspires the reader to be an active learner and explorer of linguistic and cultural processes. This method is called Practical stylistics. It involves close-reading of the verbal texture of texts. Deriving as it does from practical criticism and from the practice of making uses of language a 'way in' to the meaning of texts, practical stylistics is the basic practice of stylistics (Widdowson, 1975, 1992). Its basic postulation is that literature is a product of language, and language is a medium of literature so the 'textuality' of the text is a secure foundation for its interpretation. Close-reading studies relationship between linguistic choices along with patterns and the presentation of meaning; this helps to analyze the link between linguistic form and literary meaning.

## 4. Significance of the Study

This study is significant as the findings will highlight how dominance of one race has resulted in subservience, negative self-perception and a feel of helplessness among subdued victims. Blacks, living on the margins of the society bear all kinds of oppression because the society is controlled and dominated by a White class. Desire for freedom and equality motivated the Blacks to stand against the White-world by unifying themselves against oppression. The article tries to picture black community which has recently begun to revive and improve their lives in spite of difficulties posed to them by an extremely stratified society.

### **5. Discussion: Racism Defined and Re-defined**

Racism is defined and re-defined from different perspectives. Those who practice have their own definitions and those who suffer from it interpret it as they experienced individually and collectively. It is a complicated phenomenon so a clear-cut definition is not possible. The Oxford dictionary (201A) defines racism as the “belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races”. However, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights describes:

Perhaps the best definition of racism is an operational one. This means that it must be based upon the way people actually behave, rather than upon logical consistency or purely scientific ideas. Therefore racism may be viewed as any attitude, action, or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of his or their color. Even though “race” and “color” refer to two different kinds of human characteristics, in America it is the visibility of skin color — and the other physical traits associated with particular colors or groups — that marks individuals as “targets” for subordination by members of the white majority (emphasis in original) (Downs, 1970, 5).

About five decades have passed in struggle and strife to end racism. Commenting upon the current situation of America, Higginbotham writes:

Currently, there are two types of racism that prevent equality— structural racism and cultural racism. Structural racism involves policies, laws, and programs that embed inequality within the entities of our society, and in so doing, reinforce cultural racism, those beliefs and actions that embrace racial hierarchy and isolation. Both structural and cultural racism must be ended in order to create equality and allow for integration. (2015, 14)

### **6. Analysis: Maya Angelou’s Poetry of Defiance**

Maya Angelou is one of the most prominent authors and African-American activists of the twentieth century. She speaks on the behalf of those who suffered and are still suffering due to racist culture of America. Employing jazzy rhythms to short lyrics, Angelou makes her poems refreshing and graceful. In 1964, she met Malcolm X in Ghana. On meeting him, she decided to return to America to help him building his

new organization of African American Unity. Shortly after her arrival in the United States, Malcolm X was murdered so the organization was liquefied. Soon after X's assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. requested her to serve as Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King's murder left her devastated. In 1965, angry and frustrated Blacks set fire to buildings and looted stores in some parts of America. They faced intense problems due to unemployment and high prices. "Police, politicians, and the media descended on the chaos. They described the scene, but not the cause. Instead they blamed Blacks for the destruction without asking why they were so angry...Maya wanted to tell the world what she saw. She planned to use her writings to express the voice of black America" (Egan, 2009, 71-72). It is at this point she decides to protest against racism by holding pen in her hand. In the poem "Human Family", she suggests that nature has created immense variety as just by looking at the skin tones some of us are "brown and pink and beige and purple/tan and blue and white" (11-12). This difference in skin shade does not make one individual superior to the other, as basically all human beings are same. She avoids using the word *same*, instead she uses the word *unlike* to suggest the sameness in a forceful way. The poem ends on a couplet which she repeats three times "but we are more alike, my friends,/than we are unlike" (3A-36). This wisdom is based on a practical truth as she has "sailed upon the seven seas" (13) where she has come across thousands of *Jane* and *Mary* but none of them looked alike. Nature has created beauty in diversity which should be appreciated by the humanity, instead we segregate mankind on the basis of colour, always emphasizing that white is superior to brown and brown is superior to black.

"Harlem Hopscotch" is the most powerful poem in which the rules of racism are subtly described in a style of a nursery rhyme. The Blacks have to cover the journey of life on a very hot road. It is so hot that they cannot put their feet together on the road otherwise they will badly burn themselves. Their survival strategy is to put only one foot down at a time. In such a situation they cannot walk ahead and touch their goals of life but they are just hopping at one place. Sometimes putting one foot on the hot road becomes so unbearable that they have to take both feet "[in] the air, now both feet down" (4). Their condition is like children playing a game when they are just hopping in the same place, leading them nowhere. Their movement is not letting them grow and progress. Their economic conditions remain worse since generations. Their only worries are "[f]ood

is gone, the rent is due,” (7). All they can do is “[c]urse and cry and then jump two” (8). The adversity has come to their lives because of unemployment. They are putting in hard labour but their efforts are like drill of a child who is twisting, jerking and dancing on a nursery rhyme. The rule of the game is “Cross the line, they count you out” (11). In this line, the poet has clearly stated that the Blacks cannot cross the line demarcated by the Whites and if they dare to do so, they will be killed for breaking the rules. So for survival they can just *hop* but cannot walk because if they will walk they might cross the line which will put an end to their lives on the hot road. However, the poem ends on a hopeful note as it reflects the attitude of defiance among Blacks. Playing the game of life amid such adversaries gives the impression to the Whites that the Blacks have lost the game of life but the speaker says, “I think, I won” (14). It means that they are determined to play the game no matter how hard the rules are, believing that they have won the game. In “Equality”, she defiantly says to the superiors,

Take the blinders from your vision,  
take the padding from your ears,  
and confess you’ve heard me crying,  
and admit you’ve seen my tears. (21-24)

Angelou writes this poem in 1990 when almost three decades have passed since Civil Rights Movement started but still there is a blurred glass stuck between the Whites and the Afro-Americans. Though the Blacks are beating their drums loudly with a “compelling” (2A) tempo but their loud messages of *equality* hardly reach out the ear-drums of the listeners. They are beating their drums day and night with continuity, endurance and hope for better future. Reflecting on the painful past and scars which slavery has left on their collective unconscious, she boldly says that they will “keep on marching forward” (18). The Whites cannot ignore them because blood is not *running* in their veins but it is *throbbing* in anger and pain with “rhythms never change” (28). About Angelou’s style of writing and selection of words, Hagen says, “Word cleverness is basic to Maya Angelou. She extolls the love of language and admittedly enjoys playing with words. Her words advance her causes and cleverly conquer her adversaries in confrontations. Her readers are treated to lively, original metaphors and phrases (1997, 11).

The clash of racism, the oppressed and the oppressive group are vividly portrayed in “Roit: 60’s” where the inhuman attitude of the state officials is reflected:

national guard nervous with his shiny gun  
 goose the motor quicker  
 here’s my nigga picka  
 shoot him in the belly  
 shoot him while he run (43-47).

Police officers are holding shining guns in their hands, speedily running their motor vehicles to brutally kill Blacks right on the road without finding the truth or giving them chance to explain themselves. The worth of a black man is less than a stray dog. Black men are lynched and mutilated while black women are frequently molested. They faced appalling cruelties, insults and outrageous conditions. Still Angelou says, “We must replace fear and chauvinism, hate, timidity and apathy, which flow in our national spinal column with courage, sensitivity, perseverance and ... love. And by love I mean the condition in the human spirit so profound it encourages us to develop courage” (“Even the Stars Look Lonesome”, 1997, 132). Angelou is a woman who has always promoted the idea of courage and perseverance to her people. They have to empower themselves despite various kinds of oppression which keeps them from happiness and peace. Empowerment is not just procuring power and equal rights on societal level but it refers to a strategy of building inner strength and stability to defy obstacles and oppressions. At the same time, they should question, challenge, resist, and reject unjust rules devised by Others. The intensity in inhuman attitude and social injustice decreased after Civil Rights Movement but the racist culture still considers them to be sub-human. The policy of segregation did everything within its power to ensure that Black people should remain below White people on the hierarchy of power and privilege. It is not only Blacks but “virtually all Americans of color continue to suffer significant discrimination today because white racial framing and domination of Americans of color remain major organizing features of our group life” (Feagin, 2014, 143). In

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou says that the colored have developed not only fear and admiration but contempt also for *all things white*:

A light shade had been pulled down between the Black  
 community and all things white, but one could see through

it enough to develop a fear-admiration-contempt for the white “things”—white folks’ cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women. But above all, their wealth that allowed them to waste was the most enviable (47-48).

It is not that Angelou always talks of courage and fighting against unfavourable circumstances, but in “A Plagued Journey”, she talks of *gloom* and *hope* side by side. The feeling of gloominess has entered in her without knocking at the door or stamping its feet on the wooden floor. She calls her body “the dark prison” (3) where *gloom* will safely reside. But as she looks at the outer reality she finds that light is falling on

the fingered work of a toothless  
woman in Pakistan.  
Happy prints of  
an invisible time are illumined. (5-8)

Her own gloomy state of mind makes her think of voiceless women of Pakistan who create outstanding and exceptional needle work which relate narratives of “invisible time” (8). This external beauty takes her back to her sad state of mind which leaves her mouth wide open. *Gloom* has entered her like an invader. Just as the invader moves about wherever he wants to go, similarly the heavy feeling is moving about within her in every direction seeping through “the plaster walls” (13) of her body. The image of plaster is used to suggest that she has immensely hardened herself to protect herself from discriminatory attitude of the society but in spite of all these measures she feels captured by the invader. The feeling of gloominess has entered her entire being making her feel so horrified that she feels as if her voice is choked and she cannot scream. When all this is going on, she feels as if *Hope* comes to her as naturally as sunrise. In comparison to gloom which enters her stealthily without making any announcement, hope comes to her like an “arrogant rider” (21). She is blessed that whenever the feeling of gloom enraptures her she feels “[she is] forced/outside [her]self to/mount the ride joined with Hope” (26-28). Clinging to hope sometimes becomes very difficult when one is surviving amid such a racist culture where for a black dentist a white man says that he would prefer to “rather stick his hand in a dog’s mouth than a nigger” (Angelou, 1971, 160). Commenting on the diverse patterns employed by Angelou with engaging questions on racism, Ghani says:



Socio-psychological inferiority, desire for liberation, and anger against marginalization forms the recurring patterns of her poetry. Her writings truly show her engagement with the poetics of 'subversion'; by questioning the dominance, power and hegemonic control of the center and black's peripheral treatment. She investigates the influence of the white's culture on black traditions and values. Angelou, through her poetry, endeavors to rediscover the lost self, self-consciously, against the professed universalists and pluralists attitude of the Whites. (2007, 96-97)

Angelou uses the technique of questioning in "Ain't That bad?" where she forcefully says that though her body is wrapped in "Blackness" (7) but still there is a glow in the black shade. Night-time is also black in color, a time when after day's hard work one relaxes in the company of a loved one. Similarly "the earth" (26) is also *Black* which has given birth to so many nations, so one cannot underestimate the value of black. It is not as bad as it has been portrayed by the non-Blacks. To emphasize her point of view she cites names of Arthur Ashe, Mohammed Ali, Andre Watts and Andrew Young who have proved their skills and talents in different fields of life. The term *colored* is used to degrade the Black people which is twisted by Angelou as she says that they are not *colored* but *colorful* who wear all sorts of exotic colors "living [their] lives with flash and style" (38), dance on loud music. The poet uses a powerful refrain twice in the poem, once in the middle and once in the end. In the refrain she does not try to wash away the blackness of race, but the tone of the refrain suggests as if she is hammering this idea with aggression and anger:

Now ain't we bad?  
 An' ain't we Black?  
 An' ain't we Black?  
 An' ain't we bad?  
 An' ain't we bad?  
 An' ain't we Black?  
 An' ain't we fine? (40-46)

Angelou is not the one who migrated to the foreign land but since generations her family is living in the land of Whites. The fact should not be ignored by the Whites of America that Blacks have played a significant role in boosting up the economy of the country and making America the

most developed state of the world but still Angelou says that her soul is in search of home “[w]here water is not thirsty/And bread loaf is not stone” (4-A “Alone”). She addresses the people who are still deprived of equal rights that she has come up to one conclusion in her life that black community can only collectively fight back racist culture. Only collective struggle can give them strength to fight against racist culture. She compels the reader to pay attention to her words that nature is favoring them, now it is their responsibility to join their hands together because individual efforts will go in vain in contrast to the massive project. She says that she has observed:

The race of man is suffering  
And I can hear the moan,  
'Cause nobody,  
But nobody  
Can make it out here alone. (“Alone” 30-34)

Angelou is a bold and daring writer. In “The Heart of a Woman”, she writes: “I had to trust life, since I was young enough to believe that life loved the person who dared to live it” (4).

## 7. Results and Conclusion

Racial prejudice against Blacks and response to injustices are discussed in the selected poems of Angelou. In some instances it is observed that the nature of resistance from helpless anger transforms to outright protest against racial oppression. Apparently a black man stayed in the White-House for some years but it is a recognized truth that power is in the hands of White people and colored people are still largely dependent on the lines drawn by them. It is seen that in the United States, the struggle for equality has been a long and difficult one. The political debates which started from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s are still going on. Angelou’s poetry recaptures that confrontation and at the same time portrays the extraordinary life of a black citizen who has survived and to some extent triumphed. This paper has explored the nature of challenges that the Blacks faced and the quality of their exceptional response which led them survive. Angelou tries to de-center whiteness to lessen discrimination based on race by writing poems which are inspired by the tradition of slave narratives and jazzy syncopations.

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