



A Poetic Declaration of Resilience and Identity and Their Relevance in Contemporary Society in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

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Abstract

Literature has been a great tool which writers have used to express their opinions and perspectives. African American Literature became more prominent during the Harlem Renaissance (1918-1930s) – a cultural and literary movement that celebrated African identity and creativity. Black women wanted to be heard, not just in the mainstream but also in the black community. Maya Angelou was an active participant the Civil Rights Movement, working with prominent figures like Martin Luther King Jr. She was also notable for her works which she used as a tool to resist the white oppressors, as well as the male oppressors. Drawing from historical, cultural, and linguistic frameworks, this paper explores Maya Angelou's declaration of resilience and identity in her poems and how she challenges her oppressors, while asserting that she has refused to remain downcast, despite their committed efforts to put her down. Her poems do not only speak for herself but also give voice to the blacks. The analysis highlights how Angelou uses literary techniques and personal voice to reclaim identity and celebrate Black womanhood. The poems are examined as a response to historical oppression of African Americans and the Women, a reflection of individual and collective resilience, and a representation of self-worth against systems of marginalization. The analysis will be based on Angelou's select poems which include "Still I Rise," "Caged Bird" and "Phenomenal woman"

Key Words: Resilience, Identity, Black Woman

I. Introduction

Anna Julia Cooper, a 19th-century Black feminist, in her article, 'Womanhood: A vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race' (1886), examines how women, especially the black women have been relegated to marginalized positions, and how they face barriers that limit their opportunities. She states that "in oriental countries, woman has been uniformly devoted to a life of ignorance, infamy and complete stagnation."

Historically, African American women have faced double oppression. During the slavery era, black women were subjected to racism, sexism, exploitation and dehumanization. Conventionally, women were considered weaker vessels, therefore were restricted and discriminated in some areas including justice, education and employment. They were faced with harsh treatment due to both race and gender. African American writers like Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison have explored the issue of double oppression of the black women in their works.

Before she was Maya Angelou — the celebrated poet, singer, dancer, and activist — she was a little Black girl named Marguerite, growing up in the segregated American South. She had known silence; at eight years old, after a traumatic event that made her stop speaking for nearly five years — she was raped by her mother's boyfriend, and when she reported the rape, the man was murdered, so the young girl felt her voice killed the man. Yet in those years of quiet, she listened. She listened to her grandmother's voice, to church hymns, to the wind moving through pine trees, and to the pulse of human dignity that refuses to be destroyed. From that silence, a voice would eventually emerge — one so resonant and unapologetic that it could fill stadiums and pierce the hardest hearts. It was the voice of a woman who had learned not only to survive, but to rise, to sing, and to declare her worth to the world.

Maya Angelou's poetry is not merely art — it is testimony. It carries the weight of lived experience, the fire of resistance, and the joy of self-affirmation. Born Marguerite Annie Johnson in 1928, Angelou endured a childhood shaped by racial prejudice, poverty, and personal trauma. Yet, out of these struggles emerged one of the most distinctive voices of the 20th century — a voice that was not only personal but also collective, speaking for African Americans, women, and all marginalized groups. Her poetry stands as a profound testament to the resilience of marginalized voices and the power of self-definition. Her poems have been widely recognized for their unflinching voice, lyrical



strength, and unapologetic pride. Written during a period when African American identity and gender roles were undergoing significant redefinition, her poems offer a voice of resistance against centuries of racial injustice and cultural silencing. Through a blend of personal narrative and collective memory, Angelou crafts a work that speaks to both historical trauma and the enduring power of the human spirit. Angelou's works blend autobiography with poetry, song, and activism. They speak of wounds but also of the unbreakable spirit that survives them. The poems "Still I Rise," "Caged Bird," and "Phenomenal Woman" are prime examples of this spirit. Although distinct in tone and imagery, they all pivot around two central themes: **resilience** — the ability to endure, adapt, and rise above hardship — and **identity** — the conscious claiming of self-definition in the face of erasure and stereotype. "Still I Rise" brims with bold defiance, confronting centuries of oppression with laughter, sass, and unshakable dignity. "Caged Bird," with its controlled, poignant imagery, contrasts captivity with freedom and celebrates the act of singing as resistance. "Phenomenal Woman" radiates self-acceptance, dismantling narrow beauty ideals and celebrating inner strength. To explore these works through resilience and identity is to see how Angelou turns poetry into both shield and sword — protecting the self from harm while striking back against the forces that would diminish it.

Maya Angelou: Background, Historical and Literary Context

Born Marguerite Annie Johnson in 1928, Maya Angelou's life spanned a period of significant racial, gender, and social transformation in America. Her personal history — marked by racial segregation, childhood trauma, artistic achievement, and international travel — deeply informed her creative work. Angelou's writings emerged during the civil rights movement, a period that emphasized racial pride, resistance to oppression, and self-definition for African Americans (Gillespie, 2010).

Angelou's work is rooted in African American oral traditions, combining autobiography, poetry, and performance. "Still I Rise," published in 1978, emerged after the victories of the Civil Rights Movement and the emerging of the Black Feminist Movement. The title "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" originally appeared as the name of her 1969 autobiography, but the poem by the name "Caged Bird" later appeared in her 1983 collection *And Still I Rise*. The poem's imagery of a free bird and a caged bird resonates with the legacy of slavery,

segregation, and ongoing racial discrimination. "Phenomenal Woman", first published in 1995 in *Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women*, reflects Angelou's feminist ethos, celebrating womanhood beyond societal beauty norms. These works respond to the intersecting challenges of race, gender, and power, but each approaches these themes through a distinct lens.

Theme of Resilience

Maya Angelou's poetry is celebrated for its affirmation of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Her poems, "Still I Rise," "Caged Bird" and "Phenomenal Woman," present interconnected yet distinct portrayals of resilience and identity. While the poems affirm the ability of the individual to withstand oppression and assert selfhood, they differ in tone, metaphorical approach, and the nature of empowerment they convey.

Resilience forms the backbone of Angelou's poem, Still I Rise. Her voice emerges from comparative similes and literal oppression, yet refuses to remain subdued. Each stanza builds upon a structure of resistance: the speaker names the instruments of social suppression—lies, hate, violence—and systematically disarms them through unwavering self-assertion.

The poem also explores self-worth as political resistance. Lines such as "I walk like I've got oil wells / Pumping in my living room" (stanza 2) and "I laugh like I've got gold mines / Diggin' in my own backyard" (stanza 5) present the speaker as rich in value and dignity, regardless of external definitions or material reality. These similes reframe stereotypical depictions of Black poverty and inferiority, replacing them with a narrative of self-generated power.

In "Caged Bird," resilience is framed as the endurance of hardship while sustaining hope (Angelou, 1983). The caged bird, with "his wings clipped and his feet tied," symbolizes individuals restrained by social injustice, racial discrimination, or systemic barriers. Despite such limitations, the bird "sings of freedom," an act that becomes a metaphor for protest and spiritual defiance. This resilience is quiet but potent — an act of survival rooted in the refusal to be silenced. Identity in this poem is forged in opposition to restriction; the bird's song becomes a declaration of selfhood that transcends physical captivity.

By contrast, Phenomenal Woman presents resilience as an unapologetic embrace of one's inherent worth (Angelou, 1995). The speaker resists societal expectations of feminine beauty, asserting that her power lies in her confidence, poise, and



individuality. “It’s the reach of my arms, the span of my hips” — these attributes are not objects of external judgment but sources of inner strength. Here, resilience is proactive: it rejects imposed definitions outright and celebrates self-defined identity.

In “Phenomenal Woman,” resilience appears as radiant self-assurance. The speaker rejects societal definitions of beauty: “Pretty women wonder where my secret lies. / I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size” (Angelou, *Phenomenal Woman*, ll. 1–2). By refusing to measure herself against imposed standards, she takes control of her own narrative. Her resilience is joyful and magnetic: “It’s in the reach of my arms, / The span of my hips, / The stride of my step, / The curl of my lips” (ll. 7–10). These are not qualities dictated by others; they are hers, celebrated on her own terms.

She repeats the refrain, “Phenomenal woman, / That’s me” (ll. 11–12), transforming self-description into affirmation. In a world eager to diminish her, the act of claiming and repeating her worth is itself an act of resistance.

The poem’s rhythm and repetition reinforce the speaker’s pride, turning the phrase “phenomenal woman” into a refrain of empowerment. Unlike the caged bird, whose song is shaped by longing for liberation, the phenomenal woman’s voice originates in the freedom she claims for herself in spite of societal pressures. Her resilience lies in redefining power and beauty on her own terms, a stance that aligns with intersectional feminist ideals. These poems converge in celebrating the unbreakable human spirit. In each, Angelou illustrates that resilience emerges from a deep awareness of self-worth — whether in the form of a song under oppression or radiant confidence in the face of societal norms. However, their difference lies in tone and direction: While “Still I Rise” resonates rebellion against oppressive powers, “Caged Bird” channels its power through longing and resistance against external barriers, and “Phenomenal Woman” radiates empowerment from within, needing no validation from others.

Theme of Identity

Identity in “Still I Rise”

Identity in “Still I Rise” is collective as well as personal. By invoking “the huts of history’s shame” (l. 37) and “the gifts that my ancestors gave” (l. 40), the speaker roots herself in the legacy of African American struggle and triumph.

She embraces traits often stereotyped negatively — sassiness, sensuality — and reclaims them as power. Her Blackness is not something to hide but to

proclaim, embodied in the metaphor of the “black ocean” (l. 33). The poem insists that identity is not defined by the oppressor’s narrative but by one’s own proud self-definition.

Identity in “Caged Bird”

In “Caged Bird,” identity is constructed in opposition to deprivation. The bird’s physical confinement symbolizes systemic attempts to suppress individuality and agency. Yet its song becomes the locus of identity — a self-definition grounded not in circumstance but in the refusal to be silenced.

The contrast with the free bird underscores this point: while the free bird takes liberty for granted, the caged bird’s identity is sharpened by its awareness of what has been denied. In this sense, the caged bird’s selfhood is deeply political, reflecting the African American struggle for civil rights and equality. The bird’s voice, shaped by suffering, becomes a tool for self-assertion, ensuring that identity survives even when freedom is withheld.

Identity in “Phenomenal Woman”

In “Phenomenal Woman,” identity is self-determined from the outset. The speaker defines herself not through external validation but through the joy of inhabiting her own body and personality. She is fully aware that she does not fit conventional beauty standards — and that is precisely the point. By rejecting those standards, she reclaims authority over her own identity.

The poem celebrates an identity rooted in charisma, self-assurance, and an unapologetic embrace of individuality. The repeated use of “phenomenal woman” transforms the personal into the universal, inviting all women to participate in this self-definition. While “Caged Bird” builds identity through resistance, “Phenomenal Woman” builds it through affirmation.

Celebration of Black Womanhood

Angelou does not shy away from celebrating her identity as a Black woman. She confronts the discomfort society may feel with female agency and sexuality: “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?” (stanza 7). In these lines, sensuality is not shameful; it is regal, powerful, and intentional.

This celebration challenges historical hypersexualization and dehumanization of Black female bodies. Angelou reclaims the right to own, express, and find joy in her identity. By asserting beauty and confidence, she turns previously degrading narratives into affirmations of power.



“Phenomenal Woman” is a great celebration of womanhood, as Angelou emphasizes not just the beauty of women, but also their strength and uniqueness. The poem outlines outer beauty of women in these lines: “... the reach of my arms,/The span of my hips,/The stride of my step,/The curl of my lips.”

Imagery

Angelou uses imagery in her poems to describe the beauty and strength of the blacks, especially the black women

In “Still I Rise,” she makes use of the image of Moon, Sun and Tides – “Just like moons and suns,/ With the certainty of tides” to represent hope and optimism

She also uses the image of gold mine and diamonds, - “‘cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines/ Diggin’ in my own backyard...That I dance like I’ve got diamonds/ At the meeting of my thigh?,” symbolizing the greatness inside of her.

In “Caged Bird”, Angelou uses the images of ‘caged bird’ and nature. While caged bird symbolizes confinement and longing for freedom, nature symbolizes the beauty and freedom of the natural world.

In “Phenomenal Woman,” she uses the image of the woman body (arms, hip, lip) – “...the reach of my arms,/The span of my hips,/The stride of my step,/The curl of my lips” to celebrate the beauty and strength of womanhood.

She also uses the image of fire – “It’s the fire in my eyes” – to symbolize her confidence

Language and Tone

Angelou’s use of language is both accessible and lyrical. Her tone is confident, conversational, confrontational, celebratory and empowering.

Literary Devices:

“Still I Rise”:

Repetition, particularly of the phrase “I rise,” reinforces the poem’s rhythm and thematic message. Similes—“like dust,” “like air,” “like moons and like suns”—associate the speaker with unstoppable natural forces, emphasizing the inevitability of her rising (stanzas 1, 3, and 6). Metaphors like “I’m a black ocean...” convey the power of her identity. Rhetorical questions throughout the poem (“Did you want to see me broken?” “Does my sassiness upset you?”) serve to challenge the reader or oppressor directly, turning passive consumption of the poem into active confrontation. These questions destabilize the authority of the oppressor and invite self-reflection.

“Caged Bird”:

Symbolism: The caged bird and the free birds are two powerful symbols in the poem. While the caged bird symbolizes confinement and a longing for freedom, the free bird symbolizes freedom, happiness and opportunity to explore.

“Phenomenal Woman”:

Repetition: The poet’s prominent use of the repetition of “Phenomenal Woman” is to emphasize her confidence and inner strength.

Relevance in Contemporary Society

Maya Angelou’s poems continue to echo powerfully in today’s world, serving as a source of strength and resilience for individuals and communities facing oppression, discrimination, and social injustice. Though her poems were written in 1900s, the core message of rising above adversity remains timeless and especially relevant in a modern society still grappling with the lingering effects of racism, gender inequality, classism, and systemic oppression.

In an age of increasing global awareness, movements like Black Lives Matter, MeToo, and campaigns for Indigenous rights, etc mirror the spirit of resistance and self-affirmation that Angelou champions in her poem. These social movements, much like the poetic voice in “Still I Rise”, refuse to be silenced by injustice and instead confront systems of inequality with unwavering dignity and courage.

Furthermore, in the digital era where cyber bullying, body-shaming, and online harassment can undermine self-esteem and identity, the poem’s message reinforces personal empowerment. It reminds marginalized individuals that their worth is not determined by public opinion or prejudice but by their own inner strength and belief in their value.

The poems also resonate deeply with women and girls around the world who are pushing back against patriarchal constraints and fighting for their right to education, bodily autonomy, and equal opportunities. Angelou’s lines serve as an anthem of survival and triumph for all who have ever been belittled, overlooked, or oppressed simply because of who they are.

II. Conclusion

This article offers a comparative thematic analysis of resilience and identity in Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise,” “Caged Bird,” and “Phenomenal Woman.” The poems celebrate the strength of the human spirit but express it through different tones, imagery, and narrative perspectives. Drawing on the social and historical contexts of Angelou’s life and work, the analysis demonstrates



how each poem reflects the poet's commitment to affirming personal dignity, challenging societal norms, and inspiring liberation.

Maya Angelou's poems are that of courage, confidence, and confrontation. She speaks directly to the experiences of Black people, particularly Black women, who have endured systemic oppression yet continue to assert their worth, (as well as empower its readers today to remain determined and confident in the face of adversity). Through vibrant language, rhythmic repetition, and unshakable pride, Angelou transforms pain into power. The poem not only resists marginalization but reclaims dignity, anchoring itself as a timeless piece in the canon of resistance literature.

Through these contrasting yet complementary visions, Angelou affirms that resilience and identity are inseparable forces in the struggle for personal and collective liberation. Whether expressed through the rebellion and confrontation of a black woman, or a persistent song of a caged bird or the confident stride of a phenomenal woman, her poetry insists that self-definition and inner strength remain unassailable, even in the face of the harshest constraints.

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