

**THE THEME OF THE “PHENOMENAL WOMAN”
IN MAYA ANGELOU’S POETRY**

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THE DEGREE OF
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**Department of English
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DECLARATION

I, **Phila Kyntiew Nongkhlaw**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, and that the contents of this dissertation did not form the basis for the award of any previous degree to me, or, to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

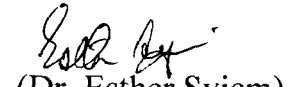
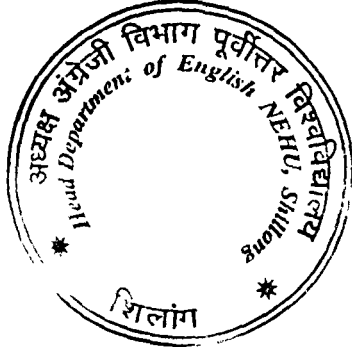
This is being submitted to the North Eastern Hill University for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.



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A prolific writer, Maya Angelou's poetry conveys a message of "survival for African-American people to rise above poverty, prejudice and lack of power" (Nelson16). Born Marguerite Johnson on April 4, 1928, Angelou has moved on from her demoralizing childhood experience with racial bigotry and sexual assault to becoming a writer, editor, essayist, playwright, poet, actress and a civil rights activist. Angelou's poetry draws heavily on her personal history.

A widely read poet, Maya Angelou earned the Pulitzer Prize nomination for her volume of thirty-eight poems entitled *Just Give Me a Cool Drink 'fore I Diiie* (1971). Her other books of poetry include *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), *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994) and *Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems for Woman* (1995). In January 1993, Angelou became the first poet since Robert Frost to take part in a presidential inauguration ceremony when she wrote and read "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Bill Clinton's inauguration. Her recording of the poem also won her a Grammy Award for Best Nonmusical Album. Angelou also read her poem, 'A Brave and Startling Truth', for the 50th anniversary of the United Nations in 1995.

Awarded with numerous honorary degrees and amongst the 2010 winners of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, following the Presidential Medal for the Arts in 2000 and the Lincoln Medal in 2008, Angelou has proved herself to be “phenomenal” through her share of struggles and hardships.

Maya Angelou has presented herself as a role model for African-American women by reconstructing the African-American woman’s image through her works. No African-American woman in the poetic world of Angelou can ever be losers. In her work Angelou has debunked the stereotypes of African-American mothers as breeders and matriarchs, and has presented them as having a creative and personally fulfilling role. According to critic Mary Jane Lupton, Angelou’s journey toward self-discovery takes her from “ignorance to knowledge, from silence to speech, from racial oppression to a liberated life” (46).

The dissertation has been divided into the following chapters:

- I. Introduction.
- II. The Image of the ‘Caged Bird’ in Maya Angelou’s Early Poems.
- III. A Study of the “Phenomenal Woman” in Maya Angelou’s Later Poems.
- IV. Living Again and Singing of ‘Freedom’.
- V. Conclusion.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Maya Angelou's poetry is a painful process of recalling and remembering a past that is broken into fragments. Angelou's poetry will be studied as deeply personal explorations of the strategies for survival that the African-American woman uses in order to free herself from being "caged". Borrowed from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "Sympathy", published in *Lyrics of the Hearthside* in 1899, the term "caged bird" stands for the African-American female who learns to cope and fight against the racist attitudes and realities that exist in the segregated South. According to Angelou the act of singing or freely expressing oneself through poetry sets a person free. While the "caged bird" is symbolic of the African-American race being denied its freedom by its skin color, the "phenomenal woman", a term taken from the poem "Phenomenal Woman" is symbolic of the journey undertaken by the "caged bird" in its quest for self-knowledge and self-identity in order to become "phenomenal". In other words, the image of the "caged bird" and "phenomenal woman" signify Angelou's journey from confused child to accomplished adult, from the private sphere of being caged to the public

sphere of “helping African-American people to rise above poverty, prejudice and lack of power” (Nelson 16).

To understand Angelou’s poetic work one must understand her personal life as narrated in her autobiographies because her poems run parallel to her own history of racial oppression and survival; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas* (1976), and *The Heart of a Woman* (1981). Angelou’s poetry is not only relevant to her autobiographical themes but the situations experienced and the community of characters that influenced and encouraged her also provided Angelou with the incentive to “sing of freedom”. — ?

Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) is a testimony to her journey beyond the pain and displacement of her beginnings (Lupton 14). She narrates her growing up years in the racially segregated South where her love of the church can be partly attributed to her grandmother’s religious devotion followed by her reunion with her mother in St. Louis. Lisa Giberson’s *Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice*, tells one that living “in St. Louis, the eight-year old Angelou was raped by Mr. Freeman, her mother’s boyfriend. The rape, criminal trial and consequent murder of the rapist result in Angelou’s silence”. The poem

“Born That Way” from the volume *I Shall not be Moved*, gives one an insight into the pain that she went through,

Childhood whoring fitted her
 For deceit. Daddy had been a
 Fondler. Soft lipped mouthings,
 Soft lapped rubbings.
 A smile for pretty shoes,
 A kiss could earn a dress.
 And a private telephone
 Was worth the biggest old caress.

 As far as possible, she strove
 For them all. Arching her small
 Frame and grunting
 Prettily, her
 Fingers counting the roses
 In the wallpaper. (7-14, 23-28)

Angelou has been likened to “a songless bird”, who “gives up all singing, all sound during the five years that follow her rape. For five years she is mute, locked in a speechless body, as she has willed it” (Lupton 67). This strong feeling of imprisonment is expressed in the poem “Caged Bird” which Angelou takes from Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s 1896 poem, “Sympathy”,

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
 When he beats his bars and he would be free;
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings-
 I know why the caged bird sings. (15-21)

Just as in Dunbar's poem, the bruised bird invokes God so that he might be released, Angelou hints at the possibility of her tune being heard as far as "the distant hill",

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. (15-22)

During this self-imposed silence, Angelou returned to Stamps where, her grandmother introduced her to the beautiful and educated Mrs. Flowers. Angelou was liberated from her "caged" silence only after Mrs. Flowers helped her release her voice. Listening to Mrs. Flowers read aloud, Angelou described the woman's voice as singing: "Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing". (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 84) In "Just for a Time" from her collection *And Still I Rise*, Angelou reflects on Mrs. Flowers:

You were the image of
 Everything
 That caused me to sing.
 I don't like reminiscing
 Nostalgia is not my forte
 I don't spill tears
 On yesterday's years
 But honesty makes me say,
 You were a precious pearl (8-16)

Angelou admired “the black aristocrat Bertha Flowers for her ability to act, with the most beautiful of black skins, in a manner Angelou had thought possible only for a white person.” (Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* 45). Flower’s instruction in literature and tolerance opened Angelou’s eyes to the realization that “mastery of language and pride in self are not limited to those of light skin” (Bloom, 45).

The introduction to Mrs. Flowers is considered significant because it not only helped Angelou come out of her silence but it also taught her to grow as an individual. Thus, like a “caged bird” opening its throat to sing, Angelou is able to control and find her voice again. “Bear in mind,” Mrs. Flowers tells Angelou, “language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals...Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning” (Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* 82).

While Mrs. Flowers laid the groundwork for her appreciation of the poetic word, it was her mother Vivian Baxter who gave Angelou the desired push into womanhood and maturity. Angelou not only loved her mother’s beauty but also loved the way her mother carried herself in society. Vivian Baxter taught Angelou values that were both feminine and strong. She helped guide her daughter through motherhood: a time

that was crucial for Angelou when she was pregnant as an unwed mother. Attributing her love for her mother Angelou writes about her in “Mother, a Cradle to Hold Me”,

The way you posed your head
 So that the light could caress your face
 When you put your fingers on my hand
 And your hand on my arm,
 I was struck with a sense of health
 Of strength and very good fortune (6-10)

Accepting motherhood was a means by which Angelou could take full control of her life and thus succeed in freeing herself from the cage, thus affirming what the critic Karla F.C. Halloway had to say about motherhood as being “central to African-American women writers. It is a theme that not only asserts the ability to create life, but a principle that emerges as central to feminine potential in religion, politics, economics and social spheres”. (28-29)

To define a new life for herself and her two-month old son, Angelou had to look for a job that would bring her recognition, money and independence. *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) carefully recounts Angelou’s “pursuit of economic stability as she moved from job to job from a Creole cook, to dancing, to prostitute”. (Lupton 75) In this autobiography, Angelou is not only exposed to a number of risky relationships with men but also endangers the safety of her son who was kidnapped by a baby sitter. In other words, *Gather Together in My Name*

depicts a single mother's slide down the social ladder into poverty and crime. In "A Good Woman Feeling Bad" from her poetic work, *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* Angelou considers "some of the blues she's had" thus:

Bitterness thick on
 A rankling tongue,
 A psalm to love that's
 Left unsung,

 All riddles are blues
 And all blues are sad,
 And I'm only mentioning
 Some blues I've had. (11-14, 19-22)

However, in a promise to reclaim her innocence, Angelou abandons her degenerate life and vows to return with her son to her mother's protection. While "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first-person account of a child who becomes a mother, *Gather Together in My Name* is the first person account of that mother and her struggle to survive as a black woman in white America". (Lupton 76)

Angelou's third and fourth autobiographies, *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry like Christmas* (1976) and *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) covers her early dancing and singing career and her emergence as a writer and a political activist, along with her failed marriages. The narratives typify these years as Angelou's most productive years as a writer and poet. She acted off-Broadway, worked for Martin Luther King Jr. and accepted a leadership role to become Northern Coordinator of the

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She also became close friends with Malcolm X and even helped him build a new civil rights organization, the Organization of African-American Unity. Honoring Malcolm X for his astute fight for unity and equality, Angelou eulogizes him in the poem “To a Freedom fighter”,

You drink a bitter draught.
 I sip the tears your eyes fight to hold,
 A cup of lees, of henbane steeped in chaff.
 Your breast is hot,
 Your anger black and cold,
 Through evening’s rest, you dream,
 I hear the moans, you die a thousands’ death.
 When cane straps flog the body
 dark and lean, you feel the blow.
 I hear it in your breath. (1-10)

Angelou’s association with the two great personalities symbolizes her flight from the private sphere of her caged silence to the public sphere of being able to sing as far as “the distant hill”(Caged Bird). Lamenting the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, Angelou laments in her poem “My Guilt” from the volume *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diie*,

My guilt is “slavery’s chains,” too long
 the clang of iron falls down the years.
 This brother’s sold, this sister’s gone,
 Is bitter wax, lining my ears.
 My guilt made music with the tears.

My crime is “heroes, dead and gone,”
 Dead Vesey, Turner, Gabriel,
 Dead Malcolm, Marcus, Martin King.
 They fought too hard, they loved too well.
 My crime is I’m alive to tell. (1-5, 6-10)

Angelou was successful in carving a niche for herself by writing articles, short stories, poetry, plays, lecturing at universities around the country and serving on various committees. Besides appearing in a role in the television mini-series, *Roots* in 1977, Angelou's "Georgia Georgia" was also the first original script by an African-American woman to be produced. Conversely, in discussing her marriage, Harold Bloom states that in several interviews, Angelou refused to talk about how many times she had been married. The poem "Men" taken from, *And Still I Rise* encapsulates how she feels about the men whom she was married to:

Men

One day they hold you in the
 Palms of their hands, gentle, as if you
 Were the last raw egg in the world. Then
 They tighten up. Just a little. The
 First squeeze is nice. A quick hug.

.....
 More. The hurt begins. Wrench out a
 Smile that slides around the fear. When the
 Air disappears,
 Your mind pops, exploding fiercely, briefly,
 Like the head of a kitchen match. Shattered. (15-20, 22-26)

Angelou further explains, "The reason is that the number would make me appear to be frivolous. But in each marriage I brought all of myself and put in all my energy and loyalty, excitement, fidelity and hard work." (*Bloom's Bio Critiques: Maya Angelou* 40). Angelou also saw marriage as the answer to her own sense of dislocation and thus she exudes her

“secret wooing” in the poem “In a Time” from the volume *Just Give me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie*,

In a time of secret wooing
 Today prepares tomorrow's ruin
 Left knows not what right is doing
 My heart is torn asunder.

In a time of furtive sighs
 Sweet hellos and sad goodbyes
 Half-truths told and entire lies
 My conscience echoes thunder.

In a time when kingdoms come
 Joy is brief as summer's fun
 Happiness its race has run
 Then pain stalks in to plunder.(1-12)

Thus, the meeting point of Angelou's poetry and her autobiographies is exemplified “as a journey or an odyssey in a quest for self-knowledge, self-identity and ‘home’” (Nelson 16). Her autobiographies enable the reader to comprehend her poetry better.

In addition, the reason that Angelou chose to appreciate the community of strong women characters instead of the male characters was because with the exception, of her brother, the men in Angelou's life did not offer her any guidance as she matured into womanhood. In *Classifying Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Kurkowski described the men in Angelou's life as “cripples, rapists, thugs, and absent fathers”. While Angelou's father is represented as the absent father, “the man who is not there for his children, literally and

figuratively”. (Lupton 60-61) her uncle, who could have been a better father, did not succeed in filling the absence because he was a cripple and was constantly in “solitude”. The poem “Willie” is dedicated to him. Taken from her poetic work *And Still I Rise*, Angelou remembers him,

Willie was a man without fame,
 Hardly anybody knew his name.
 Crippled and limping, always walking lame,

 Solitude was the climate in his bed,
 Pain echoed in the steps of his tread. (1-3, 6-8)

Angelou’s brother, Bailey has however been presented by her as being the greatest person in her world, who loved and understood her. To acknowledge her love for Bailey, Angelou chose rather to use the name that her brother gave her. Having borrowed a variation of her first husband’s surname, “Tosh Angelos”, and adopting her brother’s nickname for her, “Maya” for Marguerite and “my” for my sister, Marguerite Johnson finally legally became Maya Angelou. Bailey was not just a confidante but also became the wings that enabled Angelou to rise above the cruel experience of being raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman thus helping her regain the courage to live and love again.

In both the poems, “Kin”, taken from *And Still I rise* and “Family Affairs” taken from *Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?* Angelou pays tribute to her brother. While in “Kin” Angelou speaks of their “silent walks” and “long talks”,

We were entwined in red rings
 Of blood and loneliness before
 The first snows fell

.....
 I will remember silent walks in
 Southern woods and long talks
 In low voices
 Shielding meaning from the big ears
 Of overcurious adults.(1-3, 17-21)

in “Family Affairs” Angelou remembers him for helping her through her
 “centuries of horror”,

Tired now of pedestal existence
 For fear of flying
 And vertigo, you descend
 And step lightly over
 My centuries of horror
 And take my hand.
 Smiling, call me
 Sister. (21-28)



The “phenomenal woman” according to Angelou, “should be tough, tender, laugh as much as possible, and the... woman warrior who is armed with wit and courage will be among the first to celebrate victory” (*Would’nt Take Nothing For My Journey*, 7). When discussing women’s strength and courage, Maxine Hong Kingston’s well known novel *The Woman Warrior* takes up this image. Kingston writes of her childhood aspirations to become a “woman warrior”. In the text, she succeeds and eventually becomes a military leader whose “female” distractions such as menstruation and pregnancy enhances rather than inhibits her skills. (qtd. in Whitson 11) As a result Angelou and Kingston

are not dissimilar. They both lay emphasis upon the importance of individuality and freedom for the “woman warrior”. Angelou’s poetry asserts the courage, audacity, strength and often the creative and wilful spirit of the “phenomenal woman”. It is this very courage and strength of character that assures her of being a “phenomenally, phenomenal woman”. Thus in “Phenomenal Woman”, Angelou sings aloud:

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

I walk into a room
 Just as cool as you please,
 And to a man,
 The fellows stand or
 Fall down on their knees.
 Then they swarm around me,
 A hive of honey bees.
 I say,
 It’s the fire in my eyes,
 And the flash of my teeth,
 The swing in my waist,
 And the joy in my feet.
 I’m a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That’s me.(1-29)

In discussing the role of the “phenomenal woman”, Angelou weaves into this image other images of exploitations that have been borne

by the African-American woman throughout her history. Taken from her poetic work, *And Still I Rise*, “Woman Work” confers the African-American woman’s subjugation,

I got company to feed
 The garden to weed
 I’ve got the shirts to press
 The tots to dress
 The cane to be cut
 I gotta clean up this hut

 Storm, blow me from here
 With your fiercest wind
 Let me float across the sky
 Till I can rest again. (7-11, 19-22)

Angelou’s notion of oppression of the African-American woman produces the image of a woman who is domesticated, family bound, traditionally tied, victimized and restrained in her creative abilities, the ‘caged bird’ as it were. It may be understood thus that Angelou’s passage from childhood to adulthood has never been an easy one. The metaphor of a bird struggling to escape its cage connotes a confinement both physical and emotional, resulting from racism and oppression.

At this juncture one might turn to W.E.B. Du Bois’ “double consciousness” where in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, he states that

The negro...is gifted with second-sight in this American world,-a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, his double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the type of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness (95-96)

“Double consciousness” is an awareness of one’s self as well as an awareness of how others perceive that self. Although in extreme cases, “double consciousness” resides in conforming and changing one’s identity to that of how others perceive the self, it is also an initiating factor that brings relief in the kind of sensitivity that defines Maya Angelou’s stance as an individual and as a poet and her ability to see herself as she really is.

Earlier in her life, this sensitivity makes Angelou unhappy with the image of her African-American community because she too views herself and her community through the eyes of the predominantly white culture. She tries at first to disentangle herself from the African-American community, and uses her imagination to dream of being white with blond hair and blue eyes. But with her experience in a larger world, Angelou determines to break free from the cage of a negative kind of “double consciousness” to a more positive one where she discovers as Lisa Giberson says “a world” where she “identifies with the writing and characters of literature”(Maya Angelou: *Finding a Voice*). Thus in the poem “Equality” she says,

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.

Hear the tempo so compelling,
Hear the blood throb in my veins.

Yes, my drums are beating nightly,
And the rhythms never change.

Equality, and I will be free.
Equality and I will be free. (21-30)

Again, Angelou did not stop here; she went on to work in various capacities and it was through the experiences that she experienced in life that helped her to teach others about survival and joy. A year before the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* a wave of feminism began to surge in America called the New Women's Movement. (Lupton 70) This revival of feminism was indebted to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s with its grassroots appeal for social change. Angelou arrived on the literary scene at the moment when African-American women had started creating small discussion groups to share their experiences of oppression under the patriarchal order. Angelou herself worked with the women organization of the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH).

The autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the poem "Caged Bird" verify that the image of the "caged bird" has specific application to women. The image itself centres on strong women characters specially the women who aided her in her journey through young adulthood. However, Angelou's support for the feminist cause has been ambivalent. She states that African-American women are more self-

reliant than white women. She also believes in equal pay, equal respect, and equal responsibility for everyone and goes on to explain “I am a feminist. I’ve been female for a long time now. I’d be stupid not to be on my own side”. (Lupton 71) In view of that, Angelou explicates this feeling of equality in the poem “Human Family”,

I note the obvious differences
in the human family.
Some of us are serious,
some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived
as true profundity,
and others claim they really live
the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones
can confuse, bemuse, delight,
brown and pink and beige and purple,
tan and blue and white.

.....
I note the obvious differences
between each sort and type,
but we are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike. (1-12, 33-36)

Being on her own side therefore the ‘caged bird’ is an important dimension of the “phenomenal woman”, who speaks of bondage and yet sings of hope, and who has chosen to face reality and not allow herself to be cowed down by it. Thus the ‘caged bird’ image is an important dimension of the “phenomenal woman”, the other aspect of the African-American woman that speaks of bondage and yet sings of hope. This dissertation will seek to contextualize the two images within the poetry of

Maya Angelou. Though they seem to be opposed to each other they are however organic to one another, in that the 'caged bird' successfully subsumes its identity in the powerful and telling image of the "phenomenal woman".

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Chapter II

The Image of the 'Caged Bird' in Maya Angelou's Early Poems

Taken from the volume of verse, Shaker, *Why Don't You Sing?*, the poem "Caged Bird" represents Angelou's isolation as a result of racism and oppression.

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the courage sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

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.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

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
so he opens his throat to sing. (1-30)

The “caged bird” image as described in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “Sympathy”, published in *Lyrics of the Hearthside* in 1899, recurs throughout her work. In her first volume of autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Maya Angelou recounts many incidents of racial discrimination that she experienced as a child. In this volume, Angelou tells the story of a young African-American girl growing up in the South and shows how the young African-American girl overcomes life’s obstacles through the constant support of her grandmother.

Stamps, Arkansas, in the 1930s was not a place where an African child could grow up freely or reach his or her full intellectual and social potential. In the poem “My Arkansas”, Angelou reveals the trepidation concerning it.

There is a deep brooding
 In Arkansas.
 Old crimes like moss pend
 From poplar trees.
 The sullen earth
 Is much too
 Red for comfort.

Sunrise seems to hesitate
 And in that second
 Lose its
 Incandescent aim...(1-11)

Angelou constantly felt caged, for she was unable to get away from the “homemade” dresses she must wear to church, unable to escape “the reality of her blackness...and by her limited opportunities in a segregated

school system. She was trapped, too, by the bigotry of Stamps, whose town fathers demanded that she and all African-Americans live in only one section of town and attend only those schools in their part of town” (Lupton 66). Imprisoned, the “caged bird” is a symbol for the chained slave who tries to survive by singing the “blues”,

The blues may be the life you`ve led
 Or midnight hours in
 An empty bed. But persecuting
 Blues I`ve known
 Could stalk
 Like tigers,break like bone,

 Bitterness thick on
 A rankling tongue,
 A psalms to love that`s
 Left unsung,

 Rivers heading South,
 Funeral music
 In a going-home mouth.
 All riddles are blues,
 And all blues are sad. (1-6, 11-20)

As it is the nature of the “caged bird” to sing for its freedom, so it is said to be “the black person’s nature to make music while in bondage “to lift every voice and sing: to sing in praise of the Lord.””(67)

Stamps was nevertheless the home, to which Angelou often referred to in her autobiographies and poetry. As young children in Stamps in the 1930s, racial prejudice was a severe limitation. Angelou endured several appalling incidents that taught her about the insidious nature of racism. At the age of ten, she took in a job for a white woman

who decided to call Maya Angelou “Mary”. She noted that “for African-Americans in general, naming provides proof of identity in a hostile world that aims to stereotype blacks and erase their individuality” (*Sparknotes 101*, 388). In an effort to get fired, Angelou responded assertively to the demeaning treatment of her white employer by breaking the woman’s fine china. On another occasion, Angelou recalled that during her childhood a white dentist who owed her grandmother money refused to treat Angelou because of the color of her skin, stating that he would rather place his hand in a dog’s mouth than in hers. Then, at Angelou’s eight grade graduation, a white speaker condescendingly dismissed the idea that African people can succeed. Reflecting on these incidents, Angelou silently cries out in the poem “When I Think About Myself”:

Sixty years in these folks’ world,
 The child I work for calls me girl,
 I say “Yes ma’am” for working’s sake.
 Too Proud to bend,
 Too poor to break,
 I laugh until my stomach ache,
 When I think about myself. (8-14)

For Angelou, as for many African-American writers, the South has become a powerfully evocative metaphor for the history of racial and social inequality. It may be said that every African-American from the South brings into play his or her individual voice to a long history of

struggle with the land and the matter of color. “Black Southern writers embrace the necessity of creating works of art that are grounded in the lived experience of Southern culture.” (Ervin, 357) Thus in the poem “Glory Falls”,

From crawling on this
 Murky planet’s floor
 We soar beyond the
 Birds and
 Through the clouds
 And edge our way from hate
 And blind despair and
 Bring honor
 To our brothers, and to our sisters cheer. (13-21)

But the South was nevertheless the home of Angelou’s grandmother, the “momma”, who came to stand for all the courage and stability she ever knew as a child. “Momma” is portrayed as a realist whose patience, courage, and silence ensured the survival and success of those who came after her.

Reflecting on the courage that was infused into her, by her grandmother, Angelou remembers her in her poem “Our Grandmothers” from the volume *I Shall Not be Moved*,

Momma, is master going to sell you
 from us tomorrow?
 Yes.
 Unless you keep walking more
 And talking less.
 Yes.

 Unless you match my heart and words,
 Saying with me,
 I shall not be moved. (11-16, 23-25)

Although Angelou is proud of her strong grandmother she however, recognizes that in the white world her grandmother's power is diminished. 'Momma' uses her strength solely to guide and protect her family but not to confront the white community directly. According to Carol E. Neubauer, "Momma's resilient power usually reassures Angelou, but one of the child's most difficult lessons teaches her that racial prejudice in Stamps can effectively circumscribe and even defeat her grandmother's protective influence" (*Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom in the Southern Tradition*).

In the attempt to creatively endure the injustice she feels as a young African-American girl, Angelou uses her imagination and creates an identity in which she fits the vision of perfection that the white world surrounding her community projects. In her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* she dreamt that upon her school graduation, she would appear to all her classmates that:

I really was white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil. (4-5)

Angelou's use of an alternate identity is a result of the image of her African community that she sees reflected back at her. Lisa Giberson's *Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice*, reveals that "Angelou wants to be like the dominant white society that she sees surrounding her black culture.

She wants to feel empowered and proud of her identity, just as the white majority she wishes to emulate". Her view of her immediate world is tainted by the racial disparity that is always present. "Angelou tries to build a self and identity after having battled with the hatred of whites with repressed anger. She goes through the turbulence of an oppressed community's actual experience and sense of self despite socio-political change and development" (qtd in. Bughio 102). To bring out the identity conflict, Angelou uses the metaphor of a bird struggling to escape its cage, in her poem "Caged Bird". Like elements within a prison narrative, the image invokes the bird singing in the midst of its struggle:

His wings are clipped
And his feet are tied
So he opens his throat to sing (12-14).

The 'caged bird' is symbolic of the African-American race being denied its freedom by its skin color. As a member of a racially oppressed society the African-American man or woman is forced to view himself/herself through the eyes of the one in control. Thus, there is a blurring of vision and a conflict of identity. It causes the kind of trauma that is reflected in her poem "Caged Bird" in which she tries to remake herself to fit into the larger white community. W.E.B. Du Bois calls it "double consciousness". In his *The Souls of Black Folk*, he states that

The negro...is gifted with second-sight in this American world,-a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, his double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the type of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness (299)

“Double consciousness” is an awareness of one's self as well as an awareness of how others perceive that self. The behavior of the person is influenced by what the other people think and is distorted through other's negative image of his/her race. Du Bois saw the color line as a scale that divides the people and because of this distinction, people become prejudiced and stereotypical in their attitude. Du Bois further explains, ‘this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, produces what he calls a “twoness, an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”’. (299) The history of the African-American is the history of this strife,

He went to being called a colored man
 After answering to “hey,nigger.”
 Now that's a big jump,
 Anyway you figger.
 Hey, baby, watch my smoke.
 From colored man to Negro,

 Light, Yellow, Brownand Dark-brown skin,
 Were okay colors to
 Describe him then.
 He was a bouquet of Roses. (1-6, 16-20)

Though “the Negro...is gifted with second sight” yet it is in itself peculiar because one has to always look at one’s self through the eyes of others. This peculiar orientation in thinking was the obstacle that Angelou had to confront early in her writing career. She was unhappy with the image of her African-American community because she too viewed herself and her community through the eyes of the predominantly white culture, symptomatic of the pain and confusion among African-Americans in which centuries of abuse had left them with an inevitable sense of inferiority. According to Ostendorf, this refers to “an identity conflict and to a schizoid phenomenon evident in all human interaction and communication. Its cause may be the stigma of race, color, class, or physical disability” (*Black Literature in White America* 19). However, one notes that this sense of “double consciousness” would later be the positive means towards acceptance and transcendence. Thus, while conferring that one should “keep on marching forward” in the poem “Equality”,

We have lived a painful history,
We know the shameful past
But I keep on marching forward,
And you keep on coming last.

Equality, and I will be free.
Equality, and I will be free. (15-18)

At the same time, Angelou proclaims in the poem “Our Grandmothers” that one should “lay aside” one’s fears and that one should “not be moved”, so

Centered on the world’s stage,
She sings to her loves and beloveds
To her foes and detractors:
However I am perceived and deceived,
However my ignorance and conceits,
Lay aside your fears that I will be undone,
For I shall not be moved. (110-116)

In the poem “Caged Bird”, there is a clear parallel between the caged bird and the free bird. In the opening lines of the poem, Angelou compares the ‘wind’ to a creature that can hold a bird on its back. The free bird floats leisurely on “trade winds soft through the sighing trees” and even “dares to claim the sky”. In other words, the free bird illustrates the seeming truth of the white American’s supremacy and superiority. It feeds on “fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn” signifying a vision of life and soars to “name the sky his own”. Unlike its unbound brother, the “caged bird” leads a life of confinement that sorely inhibits its need to fly and sing. Trapped by the unyielding bars of his cage, the bird can only lift his voice in protest against his imprisonment and the “grave of dreams” on which he perches.

The “caged bird” metaphor also invokes Angelou’s displacement. “Her time in St. Louis first opens Angelou’s eyes to the possibility of

strong black women in the world, but it is not until she is permanently situated in the multi-racial setting of San Francisco that she can develop her persona as a proud member of the black community, having left behind the singular example of prejudicial toleration in Stamps” (Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* 50). A geographic displacement follows that of the emotional in Angelou’s work. Many have asserted the similarity between her works and those of the slave narrative, suggesting that Angelou’s constant physical movement through the years links her to the geographic escape of her ancestors. As slaves fled their masters, Angelou fled the discontents of her past, moving always toward a greater freedom of self and an eventual stable resting place. The link is further validated in her poetry, especially in the poem, “Our Grandmothers,” from Angelou’s poetic work *I Shall Not Be Moved*.

They sprouted like young weeds,
but she could not shield their growth
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor
shape them into symbolic topiaries.
She sent them away,
underground, overland, in coaches and
shoeless (57-63).

Here, the persona is trapped in a current of constant physical movement. When escaping from slavery, standing amidst an ocean and sending her children away, she is caught in a set of circumstances that she can neither control nor disregard. The scene changes with each verse, through time

and space but the woman repeats always, “I shall not be moved” (line 25).

Again, Maya Angelou considers her displacement as the most tragic loss in her childhood, because she is separated from her mother and father at a very young age. Sidonie Smith, in her article entitled “The Song of a Caged Bird: Maya Angelou’s Quest after Self-Acceptance”, notes that the rejection of Bailey and Angelou by their parents is “...internalized and translated as a rejection of self: ultimately the loss of home occasions the loss of self-worth” (*Modern Critical Interpretations* 24). In addition experiencing the trauma of being raped at the age of eight and emotionally scarred by the violent death of her attacker, Angelou found solace in the world of silence. However, Angelou finds a way of getting her voice back through her connection to Mrs. Flowers, an educated African woman. For like “a songless bird”, Angelou gave up “all singing, all sound” (Lupton 67) during the five years that follow her rape. For five years she was mute, locked in a speechless body, as she had willed it. She is liberated from her caged silence only after Mrs. Flowers helps her release her voice. Listening to Mrs. Flowers read aloud, Angelou describes the woman’s voice as singing: “Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 84).

Angelou's relationship with Mrs. Flowers helps her develop her love for literature and at the same time draws her out of her silence. It was under Mrs. Flowers' guidance that formal education became Angelou's salvation. Mrs. Flowers taught Angelou to embrace the spoken and written word and not allow language to be a stumbling block to her development. Thus, like a "caged bird" opening its throat to sing, Angelou is able to control and find her voice again as well as provide herself with a dynamic image within the African community. Appearing both in the middle and end of the poem, this stanza serves as a dual refrain:

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. (15-21)

Although it sings of "things unknown," the bird's song of freedom is heard even as far as the "distant hill".

Echoing a similar message, the poem "Still I Rise", taken from her later volume *And Still I Rise*, indicates that the African-American is empowered to rediscover and find a balance in the community that is unbalanced by racism:

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 (1-4).

Angelou's words contain hopeful determination to rise above discouraging defeat. Referring to the slavery era, Angelou uses her ancestors experience as a resource for her own strength. Thus in the poem "Elegy" from her volume *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, Angelou remembers Fredrick Douglass for his hope of watching his "children grow",

I lie in my grave
 and watch my children
 grow
 Proud blooms
 above the weeds of death.

Their petals wave
 and still nobody
 knows the soft black
 dirt that is my winding
 sheet. The worms, my friends,
 yet tunnel holes in
 bones and through those
 apertures I see the rain.
 The sunfelt warmth
 now jabs
 within my space and
 brings me roots of my
 children born.

Their seeds must fall
 and press beneath
 this earth,
 and find me where I
 wait. My only need to
 fertilize their birth. (1-24)

Thus Angelou believes that she must preserve her ancestors' dreams when she says "I am the dream and the hope of the slave" (Caged Bird line 40). She will rise above the pain and suffering that her ancestors have experienced in order to fulfill their dreams. Understanding the meaning of their suffering, Angelou dedicates the poem "Song for the Old Ones" from the volume *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, to her ancestors,

They've laughed to shield their crying
Then shuffled through their dreams
And stepped 'n' fetched a country
To write the blues with screams.

I understand their meaning
It could and did derive
From living on the edge of death
They kept my race alive. (21-28)

Angelou will therefore not falter from the pain and suffering that she and her ancestors have gone through but will continue to rise.

The poem "Harlem Hopscotch" from the volume *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* also embody the poet's confident determination that conditions must improve for the African-American race. Carol E. Neubauer's *Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom* affirms that "Harlem Hopscotch" celebrates the "sheer strength necessary for survival. The rhythm of the poem echoes the beat of feet, first hopping, then suspended in air, and finally landing in the appropriate square"

One foot down, then hop! It's hot.
 Good things for the ones that's got.
 Another jump, now to the left.
 Everybody for himself.

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.

All the people out of work,
 Hold for three, then twist and jerk.
 Cross the line, they count you out.
 That's what hopping's all about.

Both feet flat, the game is done.
 They think I lost. I think I won. (1-14)

To live in a world measured by such blunt announcements as “food is gone” and “the rent is due”, the critic Carol E. Neubauer feels that African-Americans need to be extremely energetic and resilient. “Compounding the pressures of hunger, poverty, and unemployment is the racial bigotry that consistently discriminates against people of color. Life itself has become a brutal game of hopscotch, a series of desperate yet hopeful leaps, landing but never pausing long”. (*Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom*). Yet in the final analysis, the poem ends with an exultant note: “both feet flat, the game is done/They think I lost. I think I won”. No matter how trying the situation, Angelou refuses to give up “singing”. This refusal to lose faith and hope, her insistence on making the most out of her life, is what makes her succeed in coming through from being silenced, displaced, and caged.

From crawling on this
 Murky planet's floor
 We soar beyond the
 Birds and
 Through the clouds
 And edge our way from hate
 And blind despair and
 Bring honor
 To our brothers, and to our sisters cheer. (13-21)

In an interview with David Frost of *The New Sun*, Angelou elaborates “I’m often asked, “How did you escape it all: the poverty, the rape at an early age, a broken home, growing up black in the South?” My natural response is to say, “How the hell do you know I did escape? You don’t know what demons I wrestle with.”” (Interview by David Frost. *TheNewsun*.Newsun.com.n.d.Web1March 2010).

While wrestling the demons of social injustice and economic hardship, Kurkowski states in his *Classifying Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* that Angelou uses her “education, self-knowledge, self-esteem, self-identity, and self-reliance to push through the discrimination and racism placed before her from the white-dominated patriarchal society”. Angelou’s determined battle to empower herself breaks through in the song of the “caged bird”. Determined to battle racism, the “caged bird sings of freedom” by applying for a job as a female conductor at the Market Street Railway Company. Though the management team at the railway office and her own community did not support her, “the caged bird shouts on a nightmare scream” and opens her

throat to sing. Angelou did not let her anger overcome her determination. By calmly protesting the injustice of inequality, Angelou achieved her first victory as an adult by getting the job as a female conductor.

In conclusion, one would agree with the fact that the reason Angelou could transform a reality of hopeless shame to one of empowerment was because of her love for literature. Her belief that words have the power to redeem her enables Angelou to write about the trauma of being raped in a detached manner. By identifying with whom and what she encounters in literature that she reads, she is able to examine that trauma as an outsider rather than the victim. In “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me” from her poetic work *And Still I Rise*, Angelou proudly claimed her strong determination to fight the various demons of hardship, that as long as the “caged bird” continues to sing and be heard, hope and strength will overcome defeated dreams:

I won't cry
So they fly
I just smile
They go wild
Life doesn't frighten me at all (17-21).

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Chapter III

A Study of the “Phenomenal Woman” in Maya Angelou’s Later Poems

First published in 1978, ‘Phenomenal Woman’ taken from the volume of verse *And Still I Rise* celebrates the strength of a woman. The persona in this poem is perceived to be a strong, confident woman. Lyman B Hagen’s *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet* insists that “The woman described is easily matched to the author herself. Angelou is an imposing woman-at least six feet tall. She has a strong personality and a compelling presence” as defined in the poem,

Pretty woman 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. (1-13)

Having presented women from the position of being silenced, caged and displaced, Angelou next presents the caged woman’s emergence into the world of work where she pursues economic stability in order to bring her recognition, money and independence. Angelou’s autobiography *Gather Together in My Name* is concerned with her

process of becoming an adult, emphasizing parenting, personal development and survival in order to develop an intact personal identity as a woman, a phenomenally “phenomenal woman”. Taken from the volume of poems *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?*, the poem “Weekend glory” encapsulates Angelou’s perseverance in dealing with the emotional, racial economic and relational aspects of her life,

My job at the plant
 ain't the biggest bet,
 but I pay my bills
 and stay out of debt.

 Folks write about me.
 They just can't see
 how I work all week
 at the factory.
 Then get spruced up
 and laugh and dance
 and turn away from worry
 with sassy glance.

They accuse me of livin'
 from day to day,
 but who are they kiddin'?
 So are they.

My life ain't heaven
 but it sure ain't hell.
 I'm not on top
 but I call it swell
 if I'm able to work
 and get paid right.(17-20, 32-49)

Coming from a broken home, undergoing the trauma of being raped at a tender age of eight, the violent death of her attacker that led to her subsequent refusal to speak for five years and an unwed mother at sixteen who decided to have a child out of wedlock in order to explore

her femininity and relieve fears that she may be a lesbian, Angelou's life continued to present sufficient substance for both poetry and autobiography. For example, seeing strong African women like Bertha Flowers, standing up for themselves within the larger African-American community and even in relation to the white population, opened Angelou's eyes to the idea that she may be fulfilling her dream of becoming an educated woman and a proud African-American. "In that atmosphere" she admits, "I came to love my people more" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 209).

Mrs. Flowers was one of the few gentlewomen Angelou had ever known and has remained throughout her life "the measure of what a human being can be". (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 91) For Angelou, under Mrs. Flowers tutelage, formal education became salvation. According to Mrs. Flowers, words have a "life beyond the printed page. Words even written words, acquire meaning by being spoken...Angelou thus represents Mrs. Flowers as bridging the gap between oral and literary culture" (Bloom *Modern Critical Interpretations* 39). Thus, "Mrs. Flowers joined the world of Stamps to the world of literature, embodied in her person the dreams that shaped Angelou's imagination" (39).

There is a sense of having overcome her difficulties in the poem “Phenomenal Woman”, a positivity about it that arises from having successfully fought all the odds against her:

Now you understand
 Just why my head's not bowed.
 I don't shout or jump about
 Or have to talk real loud.
 When you see me passing,
 It ought to make you proud.
 I say,
 It's in the click of my heels,
 The bend of my hair,
 the palm of my hand,
 The need for my care.
 'Cause I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me (47-61).

Angelou “builds a pride in her blackness with each triumph of strength and perseverance in the white world” (Bloom, *Bio Critiques*). Stepping into the arena of entertainment she finds a mode by which she can reach social equality. Her career as a professional entertainer began on the West Coast, where she performed as a dancer-singer at the Purple Onion cabaret in the early 1950s. While working in this popular cabaret, she was spotted by members of the *Porgy and Bess* cast and invited to audition for the chorus. Upon her return from the play's 1954-55 tour of Europe and Africa, Angelou transmits her journey into her poetry. While in the poem “For Us, Who Dare Not Dare” she remembers the African fruits,

Taste me fruit
 Its juice free-falling from
 A mother tree.
 Know me
 Africa (15-19)

in the poem “London”, Angelou remembers the place as being “queer”,

If I remember correctly,
 London is a very queer place.
 Mighty queer.
 A million miles from
 Jungle, and the British
 Lion roars in the stone of
 Trafalgar Square.
 Mighty queer.

 Centuries of hate divide St. George’s
 Channel and the Gaels,
 But plum-cheeked English boys drink
 Sweet tea and grow to fight
 For their Queen.
 Mighty queer. (1-8, 16-21)

Angelou continued to perform at nightclubs throughout the country where she acquired valuable experience. Angelou later joined the Harlem Writers Guild in the late 1950s and met James Baldwin and other important writers. It was during this time that Angelou had the opportunity to hear Dr. Martin Luther King speak. Inspired by his message she decided to become a part of the struggle for civil rights for she too believed and shared his hope for a world that is fair and free. Moreover with original screenplays to her credit, Angelou has also authored and produced television series. Receiving over thirty to fifty honorary degrees and awards, Angelou’s discovery of “her talent arms

her with a means of personally battling racism, and for the first time Angelou has a personal power behind her combative stance” (Bloom, *Bio Critiques*). The image of Angelou as a “phenomenal woman” rings with confidence and challenge:

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.
(Still I Rise 29-34).

Maya Angelou’s pride in being an African-American is best expressed in her poem “Weekend Glory” taken from the volume *Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing*. Angelou is so confident about herself that not only is she not frightened but even lectures white Americans on how to enjoy themselves. This is evident in the lines,

If they want to learn how to live life right,
they ought to study me on a Saturday night. (15-16)

Angelou’s concept of woman in her poetry provides an entity that binds together all African-American women in the face of racial, national and other differences. Angelou does bond with other women on a close, personal level but she and the other women of Stamps are unable to affect any major changes in the patriarchy.

“Black women in the later 1930s, although they could influence each other’s lives, had no power to question the social order because the people in power were white and racist. There were no civil-rights laws to protect political dissenters in Arkansas. Were a woman to challenge the system in Stamps,

Arkansas, in the 1930s or 1940s or in the decades to come, she ended up dead” (Lupton 72).

Only years later, when Angelou leaves Stamps and goes to California, does she challenge the patriarchal order by becoming the first African-American female streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Although her body may not be perfect or even attractive she takes pride in her physical existence. “Through poetic verse, education, a long standing appreciation of black history Angelou freed herself from the cage of her own imperfections, insecurities and doubts of self-loathing to find authentic inner peace”. (Bloom, *Modern Critical Interpretations* 44)

Again although Angelou feels painfully inferior in appearance to her mother, whose beauty was far greater than white Americans, yet her uncle Tommy reassures her “Ritie, don’t worry `cause you ain’t pretty. You smart, I swear to God, I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 67). Angelou’s intelligence more than compensates for her appearance. Once she realizes that African people are beautiful, she feels less insecure about her African features. The “Black is beautiful” cultural movement aimed to dispel the notion that black people’s natural features such as skin color, facial features and hair are inherently ugly. First coined by John Sweat Rock, the movement “Black is Beautiful” asked that men and women stop straightening their hair and attempting to lighten or bleach their skin. The movement was

largely responsible for giving the generation of African-Americans the courage to feel good about who they are and how they look. Through this realization that beauty is not associated with skin color Angelou eventually grows to love her own appearance and learns to appreciate the proclamation that “black is beautiful”. Thus, in the poem “Ain’t That Bad?” taken from the volume *And Still I Rise*, Angelou elevates that “blackness”,

Puttin’ down that do-rag
Tightenin’ 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.

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?(5-12, 16-22)

Similar to “Phenomenal Woman” in its form and message is “Woman Work” taken from the same volume of work. The two poems bear a resemblance in their praise of woman’s vitality. Although “Woman Work” does not concern the physical appeal of woman, as “Phenomenal Woman” does, it delivers a corresponding message to the endless cycle of everyday chores. The first stanza unravels a long list,

I've got the children to tend
 The clothes to mend
 The floor to mop
 The food to shop
 Then the chicken to fry
 Then baby to dry (1-6).

Following a category of tasks, the poet adds four shorter stanzas, which reveal the source of woman's strength. The woman claims that nature and its powerful elements like the rain, the storm, the wind and snow gives her the strength to endure.

Angelou has often attributed her strength and courage to endure to the healing power of religion. Religion is one of the greatest influences that helped shape Angelou's life because it served as a mechanism for coping with oppression. "Stepping out" on His word, Angelou affirms her faith in the poem "Just Like Job" from the volume *And Still I Rise*,

Into the alleys
 Into the byways
 Into the streets
 And the roads
 And the highways
 Past rumor mongers
 And midnight ramblers
 Past the liars and the cheaters and the gamblers
 On your word
 On your word.
 On the wonderful word of the Son of God.
 I'm stepping out on your word.(40-51)

The importance of the vibrant church language, which influenced Angelou's writing, is illustrated in Angelou's assertion that she liked the way the word "Deuteronomy" rolled off her tongue. She says, "The first

poetry I ever knew was the poetry of the gospel songs and the spirituals” (*Conversations with Maya Angelou* 87). She remembers how the members of the Stamps’ community attributed their ability to endure a day’s heavy toil to the power of religion. “People whose history and future were threatened each day by extinction considered that it was only by divine intervention that they were able to live at all” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*). Attending church was an escape into a different world of ecstasy and joy. When living in Stamps, she often sang solos in the church every Sunday.

In looking at Angelou’s “Caged Bird”, “there exists a thematic unity of subtle racial resistance along with the establishment of pride and identity mainly conveyed through the medium of songs and music”. (Bloom, *Modern Critical Interpretations* 56) In chapter eighteen with poignant detail Angelou recalls words that moved her at a church revival: “Bye and bye, when the morning comes/when all the saints of God are gathering home/we will tell the story of how to overcome and we’ll understand it better by and bye” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 129). What made this revival enriching and memorable for Angelou was its bringing together a community of African-Americans from all religious backgrounds.

Church sermons that were sung in the form of blues gave African-Americans a means of free expression, and it helped many to survive both emotionally and physically the hardships in their lives. The songs that were sung contain lines that may be understood as secret codes about protests, uprisings and escape. African-American often associate themselves with the people and events from the Bible .Similarly, Angelou associates herself with *Job* in the poem “Just like Job” when she says,

My screams searched the heavens for Thee.
My God,
When my blanket was nothing but dew,
Rags and bones
Were all I owned,
I chanted Your Name
Just like Job (5-11).

Understanding Maya Angelou’s religious upbringing in the hands of her grandmother and her faith in God is the key to understanding Angelou as an African-American writer and as a poet caged in the racism of “America”, where justice was not “clearly defined”. Taken from Angelou’s poetic work, *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, the message of disparity runs through in the poem “America”,

The gold of her promise
has never been mined

Her borders of justice
not clearly defined

Her crops of abundance
the fruit and the grain

Have not fed the hungry
nor eased that deep pain

Her proud declarations
are leaves on the wind

Her southern exposure
black death did befriend

Discover this country
dead centuries cry

Erect noble tablets
where none can decry(1-16)

In addition, Angelou's love for the church is attributed to her grandmother's religious devotion. Her belief in God helped her shape her writing and gave her the courage to sing in a caged racist society. She therefore makes a successful transition from the sensitive child narrator of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* who struggles for independence to a woman who is not only strong and courageous but a woman who is both phenomenal and a representative of the African-American women.

In conclusion, one can say that Angelou projects herself as a metaphor of hope and courage by overcoming life's obstacles through positive means, like courage and determination. Angelou has always seen herself as a "womanist" a term borrowed from Alice Walker, who displays courage and strength of character. Alice Walker, defines "womanist" as someone, "who appreciates and prefers woman's culture, woman's emotional flexibility and woman's strength" (*In Search of Our*

Mother's Gardens), usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful behavior. By acknowledging herself as a "womanist", Angelou sets a meaningful lesson to all African-American women to continue to endure, survive and to transform their oppressive existence. According to Crawford, "Womanist" theologians have "consistently attributed the survival of African-American women to their strength or courage in adversity and interpret this strength as hope." (*Hope in the Holler: A Womanist Theology* xii). And it is this hope that moves Angelou beyond endurance and ultimately gives her the confidence to "sing of freedom".

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Chapter IV

Living Again and Singing of “Freedom”

The Oxford Dictionary defines “freedom” as “the condition of being free” and “unrestricted liberty” (Elliott, 299), and for Angelou, the experiences and situations she experienced, have in itself, helped her define freedom. For Angelou, freedom was hard earned. This chapter will strive to analyze how a community of African-American women, helped Angelou by guiding and supporting her in her struggle for freedom and self-reliance in a patriarchal society. These women were Angelou’s poetic muses who breathed life into her poetry. Their guidance helped enrich her poetry because theirs were the voices of inspiration that provided the resources to influence her.

Your smile, delicate
 Rumor of peace.
 Deafening revolutions nestle in the
 Cleavage of
 Your breasts.

 Your laughter, peeling tall
 Above the bells of ruined cathedrals.
 Children reach between your teeth
 For charts to live their lives.
 A stomp of feet. A bevy of swift hands. (1-5, 18-22)

This community of women was more supportive of Angelou’s growth into maturity and womanhood and hence more effective than the prevailing system that was patriarchal in nature. In *Classifying Maya*

Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Kurkowski states that "The men do not offer Angelou any guidance as she matures into womanhood and Angelou does not engage any of the men for support". These women, Annie Henderson, Mrs. Bertha Flowers and Vivian Baxter were matriarchs in their own world. According to Patricia Hill Collins, the matriarch represented "a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive hardworking servant" (*Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 75). Besides being the head of the family, "the matriarch often shows tremendous strength under adverse conditions" (75). Such a characteristic fits the description of what Alice Walker calls "womanist". "To be womanish, according to Walker, is to be independent, responsible and in charge". (*Womanist Theology and Ethics*, 162) Significantly, the African-American women whom Angelou admired in Stamps were those who had achieved such a degree of independence. She admired them because of their fortitude in being able to achieve financial independence, education and acceptance. These were the strong women characters to whom Angelou looked upon for the positivity and creativity that defines her work. Their strength and the power to endure come through in her poem "Still I Rise":

Out of the huts oh 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. (29-34)

Of these women, Annie Henderson, Angelou's grandmother, was a strong role model for Angelou as she began her transition from child to woman. Annie Henderson's strict religious beliefs and rigid discipline gave Angelou clarity of vision, a vision that encouraged her to leave the beaten roads and "cut herself a brand-new path" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 24). Despite her independence, Annie Henderson chose certain paths in life that were looked upon by Angelou as choosing "a certain way of being in this world". This "way of being" is eloquently presented in the poem "Our Grandmothers" from the volume of poem *I Shall Not Be Moved*:

She heard the names,
 swirling ribbons in the wind of history:
 nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,

 She said, But my description cannot
 fit your tongue, for
 I have a certain way of being in this
 world. (44-46, 49-51)

The scene in the autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, where Angelou's rage mounts up on seeing the white girls imitating her grandmother's posture, causes Angelou to weep. She even thinks of using her uncle's rifle and to scream at them. But when they left and when she

sees her grandmother whom she calls “Momma”, politely bid goodbye to them, Angelou realized the impact of her grandmother’s achievement. “Something had happened out there...whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won” (26-27). In giving Angelou moral roots to start life with, Annie Henderson wittingly hands over to Angelou the ability to make her own clear judgments in order to articulate herself. Thus in the poem “Our Grandmothers” Angelou encapsulates her grandmother’s victory to her faith in God.

Into the crashing sound,
 Into wickedness, she cried,
 No one, no, nor no one million
 Ones dare deny me God. I go forth
 Alone, and stand as ten thousand.

The divine upon my right
 Impels me to pull forever
 At the latch on Freedom’s gate.

The Holy Spirit upon my left leads my
 Feet without ceasing into the camp of the
 Righteous and into the tents of the free. (77-87)

The significance of this is reflected in Kurkowski’s work *Classifying Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: “By being a homeowner, landowner, business owner and a woman who does not have to rely on men for financial support in a poor, Southern, rural, African-American community, Annie Henderson provides a unique insight into the role of the emancipated African-American woman”.

Another strong woman character, “Mrs. Flowers gives Angelou a chance to reflect on her life and consider other possibilities other than being black, poor, and living in the South” (Kurkowski *Classifying Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*). For Angelou, her identity as an African-American woman had always been in question, but Mrs. Flowers changed that perception by helping her realize that “pride in self is not limited to those of light skin.”(Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* 45) Angelou always noticed how Mrs. Flowers carried herself with style and grace in their community, and this she reflects in her poem, “Just for a Time” taken from her poetic work *And Still I Rise*,

Oh how you used to walk
 With that insouciant smile
 I liked to hear you talk
 And your style

 You were my early love
 New as a day breaking in Spring
 You were the image of
 Everything
 That caused me to sing. (1-4 ,6-10)

Mrs. Flowers, as Angelou recalls in her children’s book *Mrs. Flowers: A Moment of Friendship* (1986), “emphasized the importance of the spoken word, explained the nature of and importance of education, and instilled in her a love of poetry”. Mrs. Flowers not only enabled Angelou to come out to speak, but also showed her how to grow as an individual. Under Mrs. Flowers’ influence, Angelou harnessed a greater respect for

literature and for the power that words have in transforming a reality of hopeless shame, to one of empowerment. It was under Mrs. Flowers's guidance that formal education became Angelou's salvation. Mrs. Flowers taught Angelou to appreciate the power of the spoken and the written word. According to Harold Bloom, "Mrs. Flowers became the catalyst that gave Angelou the courage to transcend her muteness and begin speaking once again, an illustration of language and education as a discursive medium establishing identity and worthiness" (*Modern Critical Views*, 28). Their shared reading made Angelou appreciative of literature and proud of her heritage, "I was respected...for just being Marguerite Johnson...She made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 79-85).

The ambivalence in the relationship with her mother Vivian Baxter is reflected both in Angelou's personal life and in her writing career. Even though Vivian Baxter was not around to care for Angelou during her formative years, she stepped into Angelou's life at a crucial time when she was in need of maternal guidance. Unfortunately, Lyman B. Hagen feels that Vivian Baxter's absence in Angelou's formative years was a selfish act on her part. "Vivian found it too inconvenient to care her two children or found it too incompatible with her lifestyle" (121). Even though Angelou looked up to her mother with great admiration, she

somehow questioned her mother's way of life. Vivian Baxter showed her children what she did but never sat down to explain to them about her livelihood. However, Angelou did not carry any resentment towards her mother, instead, she described her meeting after many years with her mother as in which, she was awestruck at her beauty:

To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow...I was struck dumb. I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 58-59).

She was the epitome of femininity in Angelou's world. Angelou was proud that her mother, Vivian Baxter, who had been away for so many years, was actually a beauty. While in "Avec Merci, Mother" from the volume *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* Angelou praises her mother's beauty,

From the perch of beauty
Posing loftly,
Sustained upon the plaudits
Of the crowd,

She praises all who kneel and
whispers softly,
"A genuflection's better
With head bowed."

Among the mass of people
Who adore her
A solitary figure
Holds her eyes (1-12)

In "Call Letters: Mrs. V.B." from *And Still I Rise* Angelou praises her mother for her talk was always filled with hope and encouragement.

Ships?
 Sure I'll sail them.
 Show me the boat,
 If it'll float, I'll sail it

.....

Life?
 'Course I'll live it.
 Let me have breath,
 Just to my death,
 And I'll live it.

Failure?
 I'm not ashamed to tell it,
 I never learned to spell it.
 Not Failure.(1-5, 11-19)

In Classifying Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Kurkowski relates that “By creating this physical bond based on beauty between her and Angelou, Vivian Baxter inadvertently triggers certain emotions and fundamental questions within Angelou who was beginning to question her place in society and her role as a maturing individual. In separating herself from her mother, Angelou begins to understand her own self-identity and feminine values”.

Thus the relationship between Angelou and her mother was not by any standards ordinary because it gave Maya Angelou an ability to look at life and understand the complexities of life itself. Having left Angelou vulnerable to many tragic experiences, Vivian Baxter made up for her absence by arming her daughter with the needful wisdom in order to help her daughter strengthen her maturity. When Angelou applied for the post

of female conductor at The Market Street Railway Company she was met with resistance from the secretary in the hiring manager's office. Said best in her poem "Lord, in My Heart" from the work *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* Angelou expresses this discontent:

Here then is my
Christian lack:
If I'm struck then
I'll strike back. (41-44)

Angelou wanted to independently manage the situation on her own. Vivian Baxter simply told her daughter "life is going to give you what you put in it. Put your whole heart in everything you do, and pray, then you can wait" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 262). Angelou managed the situation on her own thereby strengthening her maturity.

As Angelou continued to look to her mother for guidance and support, their communication deepened. This communication served as the right passage towards womanhood for Angelou. By discussing femininity and the female anatomy, Vivian Baxter strengthened Angelou's self-esteem as only a mother could, so when Angelou chose to have a baby out of wedlock, both mother and daughter cared for the baby together. Besides driving away Angelou's fear in taking care of the baby, Vivian Baxter also gave Angelou the push into womanhood and maturity that her daughter needed. Thus with childbirth, Angelou took slow but sure steps into womanhood. As Angelou journeyed into womanhood and

maturity, “her bond with women, her communication with women, her image of herself in society all come together” (Kurkowski).

Maya Angelou’s poetic works verify that the image of the “caged bird” has specific application to women. Annie Henderson’s nurturing of her granddaughter “mirrors the mother/daughter relationship of feminism. Angelou is daughter, granddaughter and finally a mother as she charts her development as a woman” (Lupton 71). Angelou is concerned with the women in her community, even though sometimes she sees their lives as being limited. Like the majority of women, she too gives birth to a child. Angelou does not begin by projecting a strong and positive image of women because the women in Angelou’s world become strong and self-reliant only after going through various experiences. In one of the most quoted phrases from the autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou describes herself as an “ugly black dream” (2). Unfortunately, Angelou shows contempt for herself in the parts of the narrative that takes place in Stamps and St. Louis, for reasons that have to do with her racial and sexual attitude. When Angelou was raped by Mr. Freeman, her self-esteem plunges to the point where she refuses to speak. Not until she regains her voice and moves to California does she retrieve her sense of self-worth. In California Angelou challenges the patriarchal order by becoming the first African-American female streetcar conductor.

Reading Langston Hughes, Paul Lawrence Dunbar as well as William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe, also helped Angelou escape the ugliness of reality. She developed a personal world away from reality that helped her in developing a love for language. According to Giberson, “Angelou finds refuge and validation in the world of literature. Angelou is able through literature to find black voices and role models unavailable to her in Stamps” (*Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice*). This initiated within Angelou a sense of a new identity removed from the inequalities of Arkansas freeing her from the restrictions imposed by society. Angelou understood that she had to strive to be better than her grandmother, aspire to be just as educated as Mrs. Flowers, and to be as strong willed as her mother . Michelle Wallace states in *Eva Lennox Birch's Black American Women's Writing* that “slavery produced two distinct female archetypes: one who had been privileged by pre-Civil War emancipation; the other, a poor, strong, but nevertheless rebellious woman” (145). Wallace believed that Mrs. Flowers came from the “privileged pre-Civil War emancipation era” where she struggled to be an independent woman and somehow achieves that. Even though Mrs. Flowers can only be admired by the people in her community and would be limited in her recognition as a woman of stature in the white section of Stamps yet Angelou looked up to her because Mrs. Flowers according to

Angelou, has the economic resources to survive on her own. Without Mrs. Flowers, Angelou would never become a writer. According to Lisa Giberson the books and the writers that Angelou read also provided her “with a diverse view of the world, including her own ethnicity”(*Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice*,) . In “Phenomenal Woman” and “On the Pulse of Morning”, this is certainly true. While in “Phenomenal Woman”, Angelou infers that all women have qualities that attract attention

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please
And to a man
The fellows stand or
Fall on their knees.
Then they swarm around me
A hive of honey bees,
I say...
I'm a woman
Phenomenal woman,
That's me (14-29).

in “On the Pulse of Morning” Angelou talks of diversity and the change that would come about with time. Conveying a social message of unity, the poem calls for peace, racial and religious harmony, social justice for people of different origins, income, gender and sexual orientations. The poem is against discrimination and inequality of any kind:

The horizon leans forward
Offering you space
To place new steps of change
Here, on the pulse of this fine day (94-98).

Through this poem Angelou expresses unshakable faith in the African-American's ability to overcome adversity. Thus she asserts,

Women, children, men,
 Take it into the palms of your hands,
 Mold it into the shape of your most
 Private need. Sculpt it into
 The image of your most public self.
 Lift up your hearts.
 Each new hour holds new chances
 For a new beginning. (86-94)

In his seminal work, *Black Autobiography in America* (1974), Stephen Butterfield describes Maya Angelou as one who “does not submit tamely to the cage. She is repeatedly thrust into situations where she must act on her own initiative to save herself and thereby learns the strength of self-confidence”. (29)

In conclusion one can say that the “caged bird” has succeeded in emerging from bondage to sing of her freedom. Thus the fullest expression of the “phenomenal woman” is singing of “freedom”. When Angelou was still bound to fears, she remembered how her grandmother continued to believe in her. “My grandmother told me she knew that when the good Lord was ready, He’d turn me into a great teacher. I thought: ‘This poor, ignorant woman, I’ll never talk never mind teach’- And now I speak eight languages.” (*Conversations with Maya Angelou* 81). Reading works of literature that demanded to be recited, proved to be so effective that it not only helped Angelou find a voice but it also spilled over into Angelou’s poetic career where she developed the auditory ability to succeed both as a poet and as a writer.

Having journeyed from disillusioned self to a successful independent woman, Angelou has been able to appeal woman of all walks of life. Thus her poetry is the metaphorical body that binds together all women in the face of various differences. The implications of being able to “live again” in order to sing of “freedom”, is attributed to Angelou’s strength and courage in all adversity. Elaine B. Crawford believes that the works of African-American women “who have suffered victimization through sexual abuse or physical violence reveal a distinctive discourse about hope. Hope is the theological construct that moves these women beyond endurance to survival” (*Hope in the Holler: A womanist Theology* 34)

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Chapter V

Conclusion

Maya Angelou's poems are written testimonial narratives that reveal the transition from an intense experience of racial disparity to a world that must accommodate the 'phenomenal woman'. Her growth reflects the strength and individuality of womanhood. Angelou has brought to light how she has had to endure appalling incidents, incidents that were in themselves hostile and filled with racial prejudice. To overcome these moments of hostility, Angelou used an alternate identity by imagining herself to fit into the vision of perfection that the white world surrounding her community projects. As an artist and a woman, Angelou had risen from a sense of displacement to being unashamed of her present and her past equally. While in "Fightin' Was Natural" from the volume *I Shall Not Be Moved*, Angelou documents the effectiveness of "fighting" the odds

Fighting' was natural,
Hurting' was real,
And the leather like lead
On the end of my arm
Was a ticket to ride
To the top of the hill.
Fighting' was real. (1-7)

in "Weekend Glory" Angelou glorifies the fact that she is "able to work"

My life ain't heaven
 But it sure ain't hell.
 I'm not on top
 But I call it swell
 If I'm able to work
 And get paid right
 And have the luck to be Black
 On a Saturday night.(44-51)

By transcending her personal bitterness and transcribing it into poetry, Angelou establishes “communication with earlier African-American art forms; with the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, with the Negro spiritual; with the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs”. (Lupton 48) While the slave narrative provided the foundational expression for hope in African-American women’s writing, it may be said that Angelou’s autobiographies were the narratives that found appropriate embodiment in her poetry. She moves beyond protest to critique the harsh realities of segregated life in the South. Accordingly Angelou questions the responsibility and guilt involved in the exploitation of the African-Americans,

After Eli Whitney’s gin
 Brought to generations’ end
 Bartered flesh and broken bones
 Did it cleanse you of your sin
 Did you ponder?

Now, when farmers bury wheat
 And the cow men dump the sweet
 Butter down on Davy Jones
 Does it sanctify your street
 Do you wonder?

Or is guilt your nightly mare
Bucking wake your evenings' share
Of the stilled repair of groans
And the absence of despair
Over yonder? (1-15)

Angelou's poetry is a personal odyssey of the "caged bird" searching for its freedom and teaching itself to understand the beauty of its existence, not merely in physical terms, but in the spiritual terms of love and integrity.

Angelou has exploited different roles, used several themes and identities to signify multiple layers of oppression and personal history in her poetry. Her belief that one may encounter many defeats, and that one should not be defeated, has helped her overcome the obstacle of constantly being "caged". The "caged bird" gives way to the "phenomenal woman" by overcoming its obscurity through its association with a strong community of women who provided the needful guidance and education. According to Angelou, a sense of pride is what sustains people when they are enslaved, harassed, humiliated and degraded. Growing up in a segregated, racist South where the white community often gathered outside elementary schools to scream racial slurs at black children, Angelou learned the value of personal strength in seemingly hopeless times.

Her poetry relocates the African-American woman within the self. It complements the search for identity as an African-American woman. “I’m a woman/ Phenomenally/ Phenomenal woman/ That’s me.” (“Phenomenal Woman” line 43-46) Angelou’s poetry intersects with the multiple layers of life in America and comes up with the symbolic identity of the “phenomenal woman” who would inspire every African-American growing up in America. She strives to be the kind of writer who appeals to the nobler sentiments of her readers. This is said best in her poem “Glory Falls” taken from her poetic work *I Shall Not Be Moved*,

From crawling on this
Murky planet’s floor
We soar beyond the
Birds and
Through the clouds
And edge our way from hate
And blind despair and
Bring honor
To our brothers, and to our sisters cheer. (13-21)

Offering hope for the future Angelou uses three objects of nature, “A Rock, A River, A Tree,” from which point she searches the distant past to provide answers for the present. Drawing different races, cultures and religion together, the poem “On the Pulse of Morning” appeals to all Americans to “sing of freedom”.

Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again. (77-81)

Angelou thus traces the journey of the “phenomenal woman” from social injustice and hardships to live again within an awakened community of women who freely express themselves, own their own businesses, and become self-reliant. Angelou’s “sizable body of poetry is relevant to her autobiographical themes”. (Lupton48) and has greatly contributed to her popularity as a contemporary writer. Amongst the 2010 winners of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Angelou says in *Conversations*, that she dedicates her poetic work to all her “brown, black, beige, yellow, red and white sisters” and attempts with her collection of poetry “to herald the various kinds of beauty of women, some plain, some young, and of all colors” (190) .Thus,

The variety of our skin tones
 can confuse, bemuse, delight,
 brown and pink and beige and purple,
 tan and blue and white.

.....
 I note the obvious differences
 between each sort and type,
 but we are more alike, my friends,
 than we are unlike. (1-12, 33-36)

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