

Maya Angelou's Poems "Still I Rise" and "Woman Work": Voices of Defiance on Female Violence and Resistance

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Abstract

This article explores the complex portrayal of female violence and resistance in Maya Angelou's poetry. By examining key poems, this study uncover how Angelou addresses the dynamics of power, suffering, and resilience, highlighting the poet's unique voice in confronting and transcending the violence experienced by women. Her poems "Still I Rise" and "Woman Work" provide powerful examinations of female violence and resistance, highlighting the resilience and strength of women facing systemic and personal adversities. In "Still I Rise," Angelou portrays an unyielding spirit in the face of oppression and dehumanization. The poem's repeated affirmation of rising above derogatory treatment and emotional abuse exemplifies a profound resistance to societal constraints. Similarly, "Woman Work" underscores the relentless labor performed by women, including physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Through the imagery of caregiving and repetitive tasks, Angelou illustrates how women's work is a form of resistance against undervaluation and neglect. In shorts, both poems celebrate the capacity for joy and self-assertion amidst struggle, reinforcing the themes of empowerment and defiance.

Keywords: *Violence, Resilience, Oppression, Empowerment, Maya Angelou.*

INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a potent medium for socio-cultural criticism, offering a reflective and analytical lens through which societies examine and critique their own values, norms, and practices. By engaging with literary texts, readers and critics can gain insights into the underlying structures and dynamics of cultural and social life. Literature not only mirrors societal issues but also questions, critiques, and reimagines them, contributing to broader conversations about justice, identity, and power. Eagleton (1983) in his *"Literary Theory: An Introduction"*, literature often reflects the social and cultural norms of its time, using examples from various literary periods to illustrate this mirroring function. Through characters, plots, and settings, literary works can depict the complexities of social interactions and cultural practices. For instance, Charles Dickens's novels, such as *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*, offer critical reflections on Victorian society's treatment of the poor and industrial exploitation. Similarly, Morrison (1992) who posits the role literature provides a platform for marginalized voices and perspectives,

offering resistance against dominant cultural narratives.

Poetry, as a literary form, serves as a powerful medium for socio-cultural criticism. Through its use of language, imagery, and form, poetry can offer nuanced critiques of social norms, cultural practices, and political systems. Poets often employ metaphor, symbolism, and other literary devices to comment on and challenge the prevailing social and cultural paradigms, making poetry a vital tool for examining and questioning societal values and structures. Hughes says poetry provides a critical examination of American society and its treatment of marginalized groups. It often challenges prevailing social structures and inequalities by highlighting injustices and calling for change.

Maya Angelou, one of the greatest writers in American Literature, who often navigates themes of struggle and triumph, particularly focusing on the experiences of marginalized women. Her work provides a profound commentary on the ways women confront and resist various forms of violence. To fully appreciate Angelou's treatment of female violence and resistance, it is crucial to understand the historical and cultural context in which her poems were written. Angelou's experiences as an African American woman facing systemic racism, sexism, and personal trauma deeply inform her poetry. Her works often reflect both her personal struggles and broader societal issues, giving voice to the experiences of women facing violence and oppression.

Maya Angelou's poetry emerged from a period of intense social change, including the Civil Rights Movement and the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This era was marked by significant struggles for racial and gender equality, making Angelou's exploration of female violence and resistance particularly relevant. Her experiences with racial and gender discrimination inform her portrayal of these themes, providing a critical perspective on the systemic forces at play.

Some scholars have explored Angelou's work through various critical lenses, including their engagement with themes of resilience, empowerment, and labor. This overview highlights key findings from contemporary scholarly work on these poems, offering insights into their socio-cultural significance. Morris (2020), her study on *Reclaiming Identity: Defiance and Resilience in Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise'*, examines how the poem's recurring refrain "I rise" serves as a declaration of resilience and self-affirmation, contextualizing it within the broader struggles for civil rights and gender equality. Jenkins (2021), through *"Metaphor and Symbolism in Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise'"*, discusses the symbolic significance of dust and the act of rising as metaphors for overcoming oppression and asserting dignity. He focused on the metaphorical language in "Still I Rise," particularly how Angelou uses symbols of dust and rising to represent strength and recovery from adversity. The poem's structure and use of metaphor are analyzed for their effectiveness in reinforcing its themes. At the same time, Taylor (2022), "Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise': A Reflection on the Civil Rights Era", provides a historical analysis of the poem, linking its themes to the broader Civil Rights Movement and feminist discourse.

Maya Angelou's poetry often grapples with themes of oppression, resilience, and identity, especially within the context of the African American experience. Her poems provide a powerful lens through which to explore themes of female violence and resistance. Angelou, renowned for her profound and eloquent expressions of personal and collective struggle, delves deeply into the experiences of Black women facing systemic

oppression, personal violence, and societal neglect. Her works, including iconic poems like "Still I Rise" and "Woman Work," reflect a nuanced understanding of how women confront and resist various forms of violence. This analysis focuses on how Angelou's poetry captures both the violence inflicted upon women and their responses to it, showcasing their defiance and resilience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses content-analysis on Maya Angelou's poems to explore the thematic depth of Angelou's poems. This approach is suited for understanding complex literary themes and the nuanced ways in which Angelou's work articulates resistance to female violence. outlines the approach for analyzing the themes of defiance against female violence and resistance in Maya Angelou's poems "Still I Rise" and "Woman Work." This approach enables a comprehensive examination of how Angelou's poetry addresses and challenges themes of female violence and resistance. Furthermore, the researcher conducts "close-reading" to identify key themes, literary devices, and imagery related to female violence and resistance. Analyze how Angelou uses language, structure, and symbolism to convey messages of defiance and empowerment.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Maya Angelou is one of the greatest writer in American Literature. She is a writer of African-American descent who focuses a lot on the issue of female oppressed by intercatig of domination of culture, ethnicity and national identity as well. Through her selected poems, she voices a powerful declaration of resilience and defiance, and it presents a rich tapestry of themes including female violence and resistance. Through her use of language and imagery, Angelou crafts a narrative that underscores the strength and resolve of women confronting oppression and adversity.

A. Still I Rise

In poem "Still I Rise", Maya Angelou stands as a powerful anthem of resilience and defiance against oppression. This iconic poem is a powerful declaration of resilience and defiance against oppression. It speaks to overcoming adversity and asserting one's strength despite systemic abuse. Through its lyrical strength and bold assertions, the poem addresses the theme of female violence and the indomitable spirit of resistance. Angelou's use of language and imagery not only critiques the systemic violence faced by women but also celebrates their capacity to rise above it.

Resistance Against Oppression

The poem opens with a triumphant tone that sets the stage for the theme of resistance. Angelou's speaker addresses a faceless oppressor with unwavering confidence. The refrain "But still, like dust, I'll rise" (line 5) symbolizes an indomitable spirit that refuses to be subdued. This assertion of self-worth and resilience is a form of resistance against the forces that attempt to marginalize or demean her.

The use of repeated affirmations, such as "I rise" and "I'll rise," is an explicit declaration of resilience in the face of societal and personal injustices. The repeated use of the phrase emphasizes a refusal to be silenced or defeated. Moreover, Angelou uses vivid imagery and repetitive affirmations to convey the speaker's unwavering strength and self-worth. The

poem's refrain, "I rise," symbolizes both a personal and collective resistance against the dehumanizing effects of violence and discrimination. The speaker's confidence and refusal to be subdued reflect a broader narrative of female empowerment in the face of violence.

Confronting and Defying Stereotypes

Angelou confronts and subverts stereotypes that have historically been used to demean women, particularly Black women. In lines such as:

"You may trod me in the very dirt/
But still, like dust, I'll rise" (lines 6-7),

This quotation embodies the poem's central theme of resistance. The imagery of being trodden into dirt suggests deep humiliation and oppression. However, the comparison to dust, which rises no matter how much it is suppressed, underscores the speaker's resilience and refusal to be kept down. The phrase "I'll rise" is both a declaration of survival and a challenge to the forces that try to subdue her. This illustrates a form of resistance that is not merely passive but an active, defiant rebirth from the depths of degradation.

She addresses the belittlement and discrimination faced by women and, specifically, Black women. This imagery of being trodden into the dirt yet rising above it signifies a refusal to accept dehumanizing treatment. By rising above the dirt, the speaker is reclaiming dignity and agency.

Embracing Strength and Joy

The poem also reflects a joyous embrace of one's strength and identity. The speaker's confident declarations are paired with vivid imagery of wealth and success:

"Just like moons and like suns /
With the certainty of tides" (lines 11-12),

These lines suggest that the speaker's resilience is as natural and unstoppable as celestial phenomena and natural forces. This comparison underscores a deep, inherent strength that is beyond the reach of external hostility.

Angelou uses natural imagery to emphasize the inevitability and naturalness of her rise. The comparison to celestial bodies and natural cycles conveys that her resilience is as fundamental and unchangeable as these universal phenomena. This reinforces the idea that her strength and determination are inherent and not subject to the whims of external forces. It suggests a cosmic scale of resistance that transcends personal conflict, situating her defiance within a larger, inevitable pattern of existence.

"You may shoot me with your words, /
You may cut me with your eyes, /
You may kill me with your hatefulness" (lines 13-15).

This quotation addresses the various forms of violence that the speaker endures—verbal, emotional, and psychological. "Shoot me with your words" and "cut me with your eyes" metaphorically represent the harm caused by insults and judgmental looks, while "kill me with your hatefulness" suggests the profound impact of systemic and personal animosity. Despite these assaults, the speaker's unyielding spirit, highlighted by the refrain "I rise," demonstrates an active resistance against these forms of violence. The imagery emphasizes

the speaker's awareness of the harsh realities faced but also her determination to overcome them.

Reclaiming and Redefining Identity

In "Still I Rise," Angelou also reclaims and redefines the identity of women who have been subjected to oppression. By celebrating herself and her heritage with pride, the speaker counters any negative connotations imposed upon her. The line:

"I am the dream and the hope of the slave" (line 35),

reflects a profound connection to historical struggles and the speaker's role in continuing the legacy of resistance and triumph. This reclamation is a form of resistance against the historical narratives that sought to suppress her identity and achievements.

In this line, the speaker connects her personal resilience to the broader historical struggle of enslaved ancestors. By claiming to be "the dream and the hope of the slave," she acknowledges the collective suffering and aspirations of those who came before her. This quotation frames her rise not just as a personal victory but as the culmination of a long history of resistance and survival. It emphasizes how her defiance and success are part of a larger legacy of struggle and liberation.

"Did you want to see me broken? /
Bowed head and lowered eyes? /
Shoulders falling down like teardrops, /
Weakened by my soulful cries?" (Lines 17-20)

This excerpt questions the expectations of those who seek to see her defeated. The imagery of a "bowed head," "lowered eyes," and "shoulders falling down like teardrops" represents traditional symbols of submission and sorrow. By rhetorically questioning whether her oppressors desired her to be in such a state, the speaker challenges their assumptions and rejects the role of victim. Instead, she contrasts these images with her own strength and defiance, further asserting her resistance against the forces that attempt to break her.

Symbolism of Power and Liberation

The poem's final lines are a powerful affirmation of liberation and self-assertion:

"I rise, / I rise, / I rise" (lines 36-38).

The repetition of "I rise" in the concluding lines is both a declaration and a challenge. It signifies that no matter the attempts to undermine her, the speaker's spirit and resolve will persist. This triumphant tone underscores the theme of female empowerment and resistance against all forms of oppression.

In "Still I Rise," Maya Angelou employs potent imagery and repetitive affirmations to convey themes of female violence and resistance. The poem's strength lies in its ability to simultaneously acknowledge the struggles faced by women and celebrate their unyielding strength and perseverance. Through her assertive voice, Angelou crafts a narrative that not only resists oppression but also reclaims and redefines female identity and power.

B. "Woman Work"

This poem celebrates the strength and resilience of women through the metaphor of labor and nurturing. Angelou's portrayal of women's work is both literal and symbolic. The poem underscores the relentless and often invisible labor that women undertake, including the emotional and physical burdens imposed by societal expectations and violence. The repetitive structure and earnest tone emphasize the significance of this work as an act of resistance and survival.

Through her poem "Woman Work" explores themes of female labor, strength, and resilience through vivid imagery and powerful declarations. The poem celebrates the multifaceted roles women play while simultaneously addressing the challenges and struggles they face. Analyzing the poem through the lens of female violence and resistance reveals how Angelou portrays women's perseverance and strength in the face of adversity. These as illustrated by her voices, as follows

The Labor of Resistance

In "Woman Work," Angelou depicts the relentless labor of women as an act of resistance against systemic undervaluation:

"I'm not a woman; I'm a woman work." (Line 1)

The opening line establishes a profound identification with labor and endurance. By asserting "I'm not a woman; I'm a woman work," Angelou emphasizes that the speaker's identity is intricately linked with her ongoing efforts and responsibilities. This declaration highlights the resistance against reducing women to mere passive roles or stereotypes. Instead, the speaker's work becomes a central element of her identity, reflecting resilience and determination.

By identifying as "woman work," the speaker challenges conventional notions of femininity that often reduce women to passive roles. Instead, she asserts that her identity is defined by her ongoing efforts and responsibilities, which include both physical and emotional labor.

"I've got the little babies, / I've got to feed." (Lines 4-5)

These lines underscore the practical challenges of caregiving and the relentless demands placed on women. The responsibility of feeding "little babies" speaks to the physical and emotional labor involved in nurturing and sustaining life. This labor is portrayed as both a duty and a form of resistance against systemic neglect of women's roles and contributions. By emphasizing this aspect of female work, Angelou illustrates the resilience required to meet these demands despite potential external pressures or hardships.

"The same hands that scrubbed, / The same hands that rubbed,
/ The same hands that prayed." (Lines 11-13)

Angelou highlights the repetitive, often unacknowledged labor performed by women through the imagery of hands engaged in various tasks—scrubbing, rubbing, and praying. This repetition signifies the ongoing nature of their work and the strength required to persist through it. The juxtaposition of physical labor with spiritual acts ("prayed") suggests a form of resistance

against being devalued or overlooked. The hands symbolize both the practical and spiritual dimensions of female resilience.

"I'm gonna dance with the roses,
/ Gonna dance with the stars." (Lines 15-16)

The imagery of dancing with roses and stars introduces a sense of celebration and joy amidst the hard work and struggles. This contrast between the laborious tasks and the more uplifting, almost transcendent imagery of dancing suggests that despite the burdens, there is an inherent grace and triumph in female perseverance. It indicates resistance through the reclamation of joy and beauty, asserting that women's strength and resilience are not solely defined by their hardships but also by their capacity to find and celebrate moments of joy.

"I'm gonna see the sun rise
/ Above the rooftops of the sky." (Lines 17-18)

The imagery of witnessing the sun rise "Above the rooftops of the sky" symbolizes hope, renewal, and the promise of a new beginning. This vision of rising above constraints reflects a form of resistance against the limitations imposed by societal expectations. It implies that despite the daily struggles and labor, there is always a possibility of transcendence and a new perspective. The speaker's ability to envision this future represents resilience and an unwavering optimism that defies the challenges faced.

The Demands of Caregiving

The poem addresses the physical and emotional demands placed on women, such as:

"I've got the little babies, / I've got to feed." (Lines 4-5).
/ Who've got to go on / And on." (Lines 21-23)

The responsibility of caregiving is depicted as a crucial yet often unrecognized aspect of women's labor. This line highlights the speaker's commitment and strength in fulfilling these duties despite the challenges, resisting the systemic neglect of women's work.

This quotation reiterates the ongoing nature of the responsibilities that the speaker faces. The repetition of "on and on" emphasizes the perpetual cycle of care and labor, suggesting that the work is unending and often unrecognized. Despite this, the speaker's determination to continue and ensure the well-being of the "little babies" demonstrates an enduring strength and resistance against any forces that might seek to diminish or overlook the significance of her efforts.

Through her poem "Woman Work," Maya Angelou vividly portrays the resilience and strength of women through rich imagery and powerful assertions. The poem captures the essence of female labor, celebrating both the physical and emotional dimensions of their work. Through various quotations, Angelou illustrates how women resist being defined solely by their struggles, instead embracing their roles with grace and determination. The poem's portrayal of female violence and resistance is rooted in the everyday heroism of women who persist and triumph despite the myriad challenges they face.

CONCLUSION

In "Still I Rise" and "Woman Work," Maya Angelou addresses themes of female violence and resistance through vivid imagery and powerful declarations. Both poems highlight the resilience and strength of women in the face of oppression, celebrating their ability to overcome adversity and reclaim their identity. Angelou's work continues to resonate as a testament to the enduring spirit of resistance and empowerment in the struggle for dignity and recognition.

Maya Angelou's poetry provides a compelling analysis of female violence and resistance. Through her vivid imagery and powerful language, Angelou not only documents the pain inflicted upon women but also celebrates their enduring strength and defiance. Her work serves as a testament to the resilience of women and their ability to transform suffering into a source of empowerment and hope.

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