

**Oppression and Survival in Maya  
Angelou's Poetry**

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### Abstract

Maya Angelou is considered a major modern African American writer who presents an outstanding example for her race to know how to overcome frustration as well as misery and reach glory together with dignity. In her personal life, the black poet faced numerous obstacles and hardships which failed to ruin her. Therefore, she did her best to describe her success in defying such hard circumstances and defeating them. Besides, she attempted to convey these experiences to encourage her fellow-black citizens to fight for freedom, equality and justice. The noted author was well aware of the idea that blacks in America faced two ferocious enemies represented in slavery and racism. Throughout her poetry, Angelou was keen on depicting her people's suffering, misery and wretchedness due to the morbid effects of these two hideous enemies. However, she was simultaneously concerned with the encouragement of the black victims to resist all the types of oppression inflicted on them at the hands of the white racists. To her, the only way to achieve liberty and equality in America was through endurance and resistance. In order to elucidate such ideas in Angelou's poetry, the researcher uses the New Historicism critical approach.

**Keywords:** Maya Angelou; African American; blacks; slavery; racism; racial; New Historicism; injustice; inequality; misery; prejudice; racists; survival; resilience; resistance; defiance; oppression; Africa; America; feminine; 20<sup>th</sup> century; Arkansas; rape; cage; arise and freedom.

Maya Angelou can be unquestionably considered one of the most remarkable black American female writers in the modern age. She was a multi-sided prominent figure who managed to achieve noticeable success in a number of literary genres. She was a noted novelist, poet and dramatist. She was born in the city of St. Louis, Missouri in 1928. She had a pretty long life that lasted for about 86 fruitful years which were full of hardships, challenges, defiance and triumph (Sasidher and Lakshmi 76). The spirit of defiance was one of the most salient features of her poetry. Despite all the depressing and tragic events which marked her personal life as a black American female, she managed to express an exceptionally defiant attitude which enabled her to overcome all difficulties and reach the top of the world of glory. Tait and Daniels emphasize that "Angelou's life of entertainment, social advocacy, and literary mastery represents the 'rags to riches' legacy that inspires others to continue their journey, despite obstacles that may arise" (143,144). Her lucrative career came to an end with her death in 2014. The name 'Maya Angelou' was attached to her when she started to work as a dancer in night clubs and continued with her till her death.

Obviously, the noted poet's dilemma started early in her life when she was still a little child. The father used to work as a person responsible for planning meals for marine soldiers. At the age of three, her parents' divorce almost destroyed her family life. Sornambiga points out that, when Angelou was three years old, "her parents' marriage ended in divorce, [and] she was sent, along with her brother, Bailey, from Long Beach to Stamps to be cared for by their paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson" (22). After this sorrowful event, the little girl had to stay with her grandmother in the state of Arkansas.

Unfortunately, while staying with her kind-hearted grandmother, the little girl's agony had to continue due to the racially prejudiced environment dominating social life in Arkansas then. Permatasari comments on this point by stating that the old woman "had the nurture and means to care for the [child]... but ...Arkansas ... exposed [her granddaughter]... to the segregated south and related injustices" (156, 157). Similarly, Sornambiga stresses that "For Angelou, as for many black American writers, the South has become a powerfully evocative metaphor for the history of racial bigotry and social inequality" (25). Frostick adds, "[Angelou's] early and constant exposure to overt racism in Stamp, AR, where she spent most of her youth, spurred her strong involvement in the civil rights movement" (50). The renowned poet had to learn the hard way how to live as a black girl in a harsh racist society. She deeply suffered from the ill-treatment of the white racists whose hearts were imbued with the poison of hatred. The girl's suffering was so intolerable that she wished she had been white. Maya began to dream of having facial features of white girls as the only way to escape from racial hatred. Walker points out that "Maya suffered from a strong case of racial self-hatred, fantasizing that she was 'really white,' with 'light-blue eyes' and 'long and blond' hair" (97). As shown above, the destructive effects of racial persecution were persistently present in Angelou's childhood years.

Nonetheless, there was a positive force in her life represented in her tender grandmother who played a crucial role in protecting her from the poisonous atmosphere of racism. Furthermore, the old woman imbibed pride into her grandchild. She made her feel proud of her origins. In this way, the kind old woman managed to lay the foundation of creating a successful model that could "give voice to marginalized

populations" like those Negro Americans living at that time (Beegle 27). The period that she spent with her grandparent represented merely the beginning of the poet's incessant endeavours to resist the power of depression and come out of the deadly swamp of racism victoriously.

It is obvious that the relieving effect of the grandmother unfortunately did not last long. Hence, when the little girl was sent back to live with her mother, she went through a devastating experience. The mother's boyfriend ferociously raped the girl leaving a very harmful deep wound in both her psychological and physical life. She suffered greatly from that animalistic assault for some years. Permatasari narrates this incident by indicating that Angelou

was raped by her mother's boyfriend. She told Bailey [her brother], who then told their maternal grandmother about the incident. The man acknowledged his guilt but he was murdered by maternal uncles after he spent only one day in jail. At the time of the murder, ... [Maya] became mute and she did not speak for about five years. (157)

The only solution her mother was left with was to send her back to live with her grandmother. After some time the black girl proved to be strong enough to recover.

For a moment, Angelou had the illusion that life with her father could be better than that with her mother. Getting accustomed to the tendency of spending "her life in motion," (Le Melle 1036), the girl decided to join her father but unfortunately she discovered that her decision was by no means right. Under the pressure of the gloomy life with her father and the dreadful treatment of her step-mother 'Dolores', Maya went to live with some young waifs. Choudhry and Asif state that when the pitiable teenager went "to live at her father's place later, the fight between her and Dolores result[ed] in Maya's taking refuge at a junk yard" (471). Brown adds that, during her teenage, the miserable girl "drifted through the world of prostitution and drugs, [and became] a

seemingly 'lost soul' with no direction" (201). Had these terrible experiences happened to a person with normal abilities, they could have destroyed him or her entirely. Fortunately, the prominent writer managed to cease the process of her downfall, and start moving up towards the top of glory.

Then, she began to take the first right step towards becoming an independent mature person. When she was sixteen years old, she got pregnant and gave birth to her only child, Guy. This happy incident represented a turning point in the writer's life. Le Melle emphasizes that "An unwed mother at age seventeen, she became even more determined to walk through any door slammed in her face" (1037). Hence, the birth of her son turned her into a responsible mature woman. "Raising her son alone, she worked as a bordello madam ... before settling into marriage in 1950" (West 12, 13). In other words, the boy proved to be a highly motivating and positive power that led Maya to reconstruct her life on firm bases and find the right path in the perilous world of racism in America.

Furthermore, Maya travelled a lot. She went to a number of European countries. But what left a deep impact on her as a writer was her visit to the old continent, Africa. She even lived for some time in Cairo, Egypt, where "she worked as an editor for *The Arab Observer*, an English-language weekly in Cairo from 1961 to 1962" (West 13). The noted writer visited also Ghana. There, she "worked as an instructor in the music department at the University of Ghana" (McDuffie & Woodard 524). In spite of her feeling of pride nourished by her visits to Africa, such returns to the mother-land "confirmed ... [her] hunger for acceptance and equality in the United States" (Levecq 83). In other words, going back to Africa meant to the renowned poet both an attempt to express

black Americans' suffering due to being rejected in their country as well as a source of pride. Consequently, she enjoyed her stay in the black continent which was the homeland of her race. It was the land of her predecessors. When reaching there, she affirmed her identity as a black woman and absorbed more pride by being in touch with her origins.

Relying on the application of the New Historicism critical approach, this paper aims at examining the theme of the resurrection of African Americans despite their limitless oppression at the hands of their fellow-whites as shown in Maya Angelou's poetry. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the New Historicism approach is a new critical method which could be used to analyze a literary work by focusing on the interaction between this work and the historical, cultural and social aspects pertinent to the society where it is written (Hickling 54). Elaborating the definition of this critical method, Lyu states:

the New Historicism has viewed literature as the reflection of the world view of a period. From the perspective of the new historicists, history is not merely the background of literature any more. Literary texts not only represent the conclusion of a cultural conversation in one historical period but also participate in that conversation. Literary texts are agents as well as effects of cultural change and are parts of the documents which compose the history. (1075)

Accordingly, literary texts are considered as elements which both affect and are influenced by social, historical and cultural conditions dominant in a certain society during a given period of time. This approach came to light in the early 1980s at the hands of the famous American literary historian "Stephen Greenblatt" (Hamilton 131). Ever since that time, this critical method has become one of the most famous approaches in literary criticism.

The application of the New Historicist critical approach to Angelou's poetry could certainly help to show the mutual effect of her poems and the history of the African race in America. The renowned



black poet handles the theme of her people's oppression inflicted by white racists. She also participates in encouraging black Americans to defy such persecution and work to change their living conditions by achieving their resurrection. She presents herself as an example for her race since she was able to overcome all hardships which faced her in her life as a black woman.

Nonetheless, it is worth stating that the autobiographical aspects in Angelou's poetry could never be handled without relating them to the historical conditions of her race. Thus, it gets obvious that she attempted to make her literature expose her fellow-blacks' torment at the hands of racists and the "resilient story" of her life so as to encourage them to follow her footsteps (Wyatt 139). The ability to survive misfortunes and to show resistance in the face of enemies, which the poet tries to implant within her people's hearts through her poetry, characterized the author's own life. Sasidher & Lakshmi comment:

It is true that Angelou encountered many defeats in her life but she remained undefeated. The situational irony is evident at every stage in the life of Maya Angelou. Though these circumstances were traumatic, Angelou faced them with temerity. (77)

The whip which kept lashing her back mercilessly did not destroy her but rather made her mock life through her success as an African American female writer who established herself as a pre-eminent literary figure during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This writer's sublime position could be noticed through the fact that "Her poetry and prose have earned the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize nominations"(Bader 3). Hence, her ability for endurance and resistance can be seen quite clearly even through the title of her first autobiographical work.

Angelou inaugurated her autobiographical novels with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The book, which is described by Bloom as one of the famous autobiographies indicating the author's resilience and ultimate



success in the face of life difficulties, was published in 1969 (311). The novel shows how the author was able to defy all the fetters imposed by the inimical and hatred-laden atmosphere of racism. Walker sees that the main theme of the book shows "the progression from rage and indignation to subtle resistance to active protest" within the author's life (93). This autobiographical element can be noticed in Angelou's poetry as well. Therefore, the researcher will examine firstly the writer's suffering as a black American due to the detestable practices of racial prejudice, and secondly her legendary ability to overcome her misery. These two sides of Maya's life will be discussed in the light of her poetry. Furthermore, these ideas will be seen on a wider scope which could treat the poet as part of the whole black race in America.

Like all African Americans, Angelou had to wade through the swamp of racial segregation which was crushing these people mercilessly during the twentieth century. Unluckily, the Emancipation Proclamation issued by the president of the United States of America in 1863 did not terminate blacks' suffering. It rather marked the beginning of the second stage of their agony. One of the hideous features of the severe racial discrimination in America was mentioned as follows:

Between 1890 and 1960, thousands of towns across the United States drove out their black populations or took steps to forbid African Americans from living in them, creating "sundown towns," so named because many marked their city limits with signs typically reading, "Nigger, Don't Let The Sun Go Down On You In...[a name of a city in which blacks were not allowed to live]". (Loewen 23)

As a result, though slavery gave out its last breath the day the Proclamation was announced, white racists continued to scourge black citizens' backs through despicable racial practices. African American females suffered most from that aversion-laden atmosphere for they had to bear the intolerable yoke of racial discrimination. Accordingly, Le

Melle says, "As a poet, ...[Angelou] distilled her experience, ...[and Negroes'] experience, into imagery and verse that woke the heart" (1036). This task seems to have been the major preoccupation of the preeminent literary figure throughout her career.

Additionally, the history of the Afro-Americans was saturated with bitterness and wretchedness since they had touched the land of the New World. At that time slavery was imposed on them. Abdulhameed argues that "Being a slave is something that no one in this world would accept but blacks had no choice" (19). Thus, during both the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries black people were plucked mercilessly out of the tender bosom of their mother land, Africa. They were caught as if they were animals at the western shores of the old continent via traps set up for them. This represented the dark picture within whose frames they were to be imprisoned. They were considered merely as worthless animals. Walker comments that "slavery relied on a belief that those enslaved were not really human beings" (92). Their journeys across the Atlantic Ocean on the ships of slave traders emphasized this humiliating status for them. They used to be kept in built-in cages on these ships. On reaching the American land, they were sold on auctions. The value of every slave depended mainly on how healthy and strongly built his or her body was. Henceforth, their treatment as cattle was to be the norm in the new country.

Like all African-American writers, Angelou could not help remembering those painful days of her ancestors' slavery. In "My Guilt", she relates herself firmly to her black heritage. To her, blacks had to suffer because of nothing wrong they did. Le Melle argues that these people's "enslaved ancestors faced violence for assertions of sovereignty, as so did generations of their emancipated children" (1040). It was their

fate to be smashed by the nasty grip of slavery as well as racism, just as their predecessors had been humiliated and tormented merely because of the colour of their skin:

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 (Angelou 45).

Line 3 stated above gives a hint at the limitless oppression and unimaginable torture black slaves had to undergo at the hands of their white masters. Some of the slave owners were heartless enough to consider the Africans they possessed as cattle intended to breed. Fathima argues for this idea by elucidating that "Under slavery black women were bred like chattel to increase the master's labor force" (64). Therewithal, Hembrough stresses the same view by pointing out that, during the time of serfdom, "African-American women ...[were] represented in a limited number of roles, including those of house maids, field workers, and breeders" (164). The youngsters these miserable females brought to life were regarded as new animals meant for sale. That is how many black families were disunited due to such a shameful practice. The last line in the above extract is very significant. First, the repetition of the words 'My guilt' forms an anaphora. This form-related reiteration attracts attention to the fact that these slaves were humiliated and ill-treated without committing any crimes or mistakes. Their only problem was that being labeled as 'slaves'. However, they will change their agony into a melody. Second, the writer uses a personification when she compares guilt to a musician playing very effective music. Third, the speaker's tears are likened to musical instruments employed to produce a melody. Such rhetorical elements indicate the spirit of stoicism and defiance dominating slaves even at the harshest moments in their lives.

And her poetry presents one of Angelou's imaginative characters that toss the reader back to the dark time of slavery. In "Slave Coffle", the voice heard through the poem is that of a slave in distress. The picture drawn is that of a line of slaves tied to one another and forced to walk away from their lands. In an exhausted voice full of helplessness and misery, the speaker tells how he was driven away while being fettered as if he and other slaves had been cattle. His home land was fading away far from him. He was being distanced little by little from his land:

Just Beyond my reaching,  
an itch away from fingers,  
was the river bed  
and the high road home (Angelou 215).

Although his home was so close to him, it was still far away because of the shackles of slavery imposed on him. The word 'itch' is very significant for it indicates how close and yet how far his land was to him just like what happens when man has to scratch an itchy part in his back but he could not reach it. This image concretizes the slave's helplessness and the intolerable grip of slavery on him. The river mentioned above symbolizes the blood connection between Africans and their home land. Like other slaves, this man was being harshly cut off from his origins. This moment stood for the impending darkness he was going to be immersed in.

Obviously, the Civil war as well as the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 offered the black Americans only little relief. The merciless and shame-branded grip of slavery was replaced by the suffocating one of racism. Representing "the voice of her race," Angelou "reflects the bitter realities of slavery and racism in her poems" (Rani 1). She was well aware of the fact that racial segregation was the new mask worn by the misanthropic and poisonous feelings within the hearts of

prejudiced whites. Simply speaking, the year 1863 marked the beginning of a new stage of blacks' misery in America.

It is worth mentioning that Angelou was keen on shedding light on the hateful racial practices whose bitterness she herself tasted frequently in her life. The first step to convince others to blindly follow their diabolic attitudes, white Americans attempted to segregate blacks and make them besieged with the fences of being different. This started by coining racially significant labels. Such despicable labels came in the form of names like "nigger" or "Negro". Such petty offenses, as Willis points out, were "Racial microaggressions ... racial slights and subtle insults aimed at people of color...., [and that could] accumulate over time to" dehumanize the victims and make them tolerate their humiliation (209). Accordingly, racists tended to hurl lots of such labels on them to make the other fellow-whites ready to attack them even without having reasons for behaving as such. The process of segregating blacks through using labels to call them took several forms.

Angelou records these racial tendencies in her poem "The Calling of Names". This literary work shows the white racists' insistence on keeping their fellow-African Americans locked up within the boundaries marked by the names used to call them. When one of such racial labels was attacked or worn-out, another term was quickly coined:

He went to being called a colored man  
after answering to "hey, nigger."

From colored man to Negro,  
With the N in caps,

Light, Yellow, Brown  
and Dark-brown skin,  
were okay colors to  
describe him then (Angelou 46).

What the author is trying to tell here is that racists showed ceaseless endeavours to imprison blacks in the circle of their unjustified hatred by using such names. Rani says, "In America Blacks were insulted by calling [them using the]... word "nigger" instead of calling [them] by their names"(3). Racially prejudiced whites were behaving so in a way to resist any attempt of accepting coloured people in the domain of Americanism or to give them the bliss of being called 'fellow-citizens' or treating them as such.

Moreover, black children's hunger came as a corollary of racism. White racists insisted on depriving Afro-Americans of the opportunities to get decent or well-paying jobs. The result was that these people did not have enough money to support their families. They could not even provide their children with the food they needed. Therefore, starvation resided most of the time in blacks' houses. Empty and barely filled stomachs used to cry out asking for food. Whites with well-fed stomachs never paid attention to Negro children's suffering. Racially prejudiced Americans did not care about them. On TV, such depressing pictures were regularly shown. Through her poetry, Angelou "prompts us [as readers] to examine the cries and [even the] 'curses'" of such miserable children (Harris 128). For instance, she draws a picture of this condition in her poem "Televised":

If nothing wondrous preceded  
the catastrophic announcements,  
certainly nothing will follow, save  
the sad-eyed faces of  
bony children,  
distended bellies making  
mock at their starvation.  
Why are they always  
Black?  
Whom do they await?  
The lamb-chop flesh

reeks and cannot be eaten... (Angelou 246).

The use of an oxymoron in the above lines is quite significant. This can be seen in the contradiction between the words 'bony' and 'distended'. This rhetorical feature indicates the big difference between the condition of whites and that of black children. Hunger turned coloured children into skinny or bony bodies whereas whites' stomachs were full of food. This wide gap between the two types of people is entirely flagrant. The significant question is why the starving children are always black. The speaker is waiting for an answer but it seems that the expected reply could never be heard.

It is safe to state that Angelou was keen on expressing her deep disappointment in the idea of the 'American dream'. She thought that, in the case of many people especially Afro-Americans, this dream proved to be a nightmare. To her, America ceased to represent the land of great opportunities, prosperity or even equality. The poem "America" tackles these issues in a very intensive way achieved through the usage of run-on unrhymed couplets. This is different from the heroic couplets used especially in Neo-classical poetry. The former are formed when "the two lines of the unrhymed couplet form a single sentence" (Litcharts, Couplet Definition). Therefore, unlike what happens in the heroic couplets, in the following couplets there is no rhyme, and the metre takes the form of diameters (two feet in each line):

The gold of her promise  
has never been mined

Her borders of justice  
not clearly defined

. . . .

Her proud declarations



are leaves on the wind

Her southern exposure  
black death did befriend (Angelou 85).

The poet sees that America was no longer the land of bright dreams but it rather became a land dominated by racism, misery and hopelessness. It actually grew into a place full of poverty, hunger, oppression, and meaningless slogans. It was basically the African Americans who were well aware of these gloomy facts about the reality of life in America. It is evident that in the above lines the writer does not use full stops at the end of her lines. Therefore, these run-on lines in the above extract show how the speaker's spontaneity defeated her accuracy in a way that made her continue expressing herself without feeling the need to stop. The accumulated grievances were compelling her to keep on talking. This idea has been indicated through the use of enjambment.

Moreover, Afro-Americans' disappointment was overwhelming. They reached the moment at which they realized that they had to strive for their rights and their freedom all alone. They had to shake off their fallacies about the help which could come to them from white liberals. The conclusion was that blacks themselves had no way to break their fetters but to rely on themselves. In her poem "On Working White Liberals", the author says:

I don't ask the Foreign Legion  
Or anyone to win my freedom  
Or to fight my battle better than I can (Angelou 47).

It is clear in the above lines that the poet representing all her black fellows lost belief in the help of other countries or white liberals in America. In fact, Angelou was not the only famous Negro writer who condemned the white liberals' passivity in the face of racism. Like her, Alice Walker (b. 1944- ) saw that these liberals disappointed their fellow-black citizens when "they heralded the death" of the anti-segregation

movements (Stover 196). Coloured people had to depend on themselves to attain their rights as true American citizens. They had to work hard to attain the fruit of freedom. Angelou had a dream of seeing a white liberal help blacks to get their liberty. Yet, she was entirely turned down. The poet thinks that African-Americans had to rely on themselves and to get rid of the illusion of finding help from whites until the latter could be ready to take their sides in their strife for freedom. Thus she writes "...I'll believe in Liberals' aid for us / When I see a white man load a Black man's gun" (Angelou 47). As long as liberals were not ready to take that step, there was no way for coloured Americans to depend on them in their quest for equality and freedom.

Left with their backs against the wall, and being disappointed in their country's legal system, black Americans were led by uncontrollable wrath to go out to streets and express their grievances loudly. In her book *A Song Flung Up To Heaven* (2002), Angelou states how she participated in peaceful anti-racism activities and marches called for by Martin Luther King like the "Poor People's March" in 1986 (Nelson 126). Argument over whether to face racial prejudice peacefully or violently began to prevail during the sixties of the previous century. Biga depicts this atmosphere by stating:

Black America was at a crossroads in the late 1960s. Using nonviolent resistance actions, the Civil Rights movement spurred legal changes that finally made African Americans equal citizens under the law if not in practice. Meanwhile the rising Black Power movement used militant tactics and rhetoric to demand equal rights now. ... The assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy seemed to wipe away the progress made. Anger spewed. ... Riots erupted. (3)

Evidently, racists were there to repress them severely.

In her poem "Riot: 60's", for instance, Angelou gives a cinematic view of the black Americans' riots and the disturbance they caused in big

cities like New York and Detroit during the 1960s. While reading the text, the reader could feel that s/he gradually becomes caught among the angry Negro groups moving in the streets and burning locations which used to symbolize their oppression at the hands of whites. Angelou tells how she liked seeing a pawnshop burning and flames were destroying it:

Our  
YOUR FRIEND CHARLIE pawnshop  
was a glorious blaze  
I heard the flames lick  
then eat the trays  
of zircons  
mounted in red gold alloys (Angelou 38).

Pawnshops were part of the system exploiting African Americans especially in big cities by lending them money at high interest which usually led to making them lose the valuable belongings they had pawned before.

Likewise, the same destiny happened to a furniture store following the installment sales system at high interest in a way which led to selling stuff at exaggerated prices. So, when fire started to demolish it, the writer who seems to be one of the people involved in the riots, like other rioters, felt pleased:

Some  
thought the FRIENDLY FINANCE FURNITURE CO.  
burned higher  
When a leopard-print sofa with gold legs  
(which makes into a bed)  
caught fire  
an admiring groan from the waiting horde  
"Absentee landlord  
you got that shit" (Angelou 38).

The tragic denouement comes at the end of the poem when law-enforcement troops began to shoot the rioters killing them mercilessly:

national guard nervous with his shiny gun  
goose the motor quicker

here's my nigga picka  
shoot him in the belly  
shoot him while he run (Angelou 39).

Instead of attempting to discuss the problems facing these people and solve them, the troopers decided right away to kill them with guns. Their racism emerged overtly even through their language. They kept calling them 'niggers' which is a very racially offensive word. Even though the rioters could run away, such an opportunity was banned by troopers who offered no tolerance or mercy. The killing machines were always active. What shows how the poet was pleased with the riots could be seen in the way she describes the fire ruining the pawnshop as "a glorious blaze' and how the furniture store "burned higher."

Besides, Angelou had to resist the oppressive powers of racial prejudice and affirm her strength to overcome them and survive the groundless hatred of racists. She tried to devote her poetic abilities to exposing the ugly face of racism in her verse. Despite the gloomy atmosphere the writer as a black person lived in due to racial prejudice, she was insistent on confronting such oppressive powers and rising above them. Her poetry skillfully uncovers the ugly face of racism and to support African-Americans in their attempts to defy frustration and survive the venomous environment constituted by the white racists' aversion. Many of her poems were meant to lift the spirits of the downtrodden blacks.

To Angelou, the best way to resist the frustrating atmosphere of racism in the American society is to keep reminding herself as well as her fellow-black Americans of their time-honoured origins and the glorious past of their ancestors. This meant for her glorifying her Africanism. In her poem, "For Us, Who Dare Not Dare," the coloured speaker seems to be singing about the greatness of their mother land, Africa. The song was

meant to address the white racists who spared no effort to humiliate their fellow-black citizens and put them in a status lower than that of human beings. Accordingly, she reminds these racially prejudiced people of what Africa means. It is the land of the invincible Pharaohs who managed to build the oldest civilization on the banks of the charming river, Nile. It is the home of beauty where nature is still virgin and lucrative:

Be me a Pharaoh  
Build me high pyramids of stone and question  
See me the Nile  
at twilight  
and jaguars moving to  
the slow cool draught (Angelou 87).

Also, the river Congo mentioned in the second stanza is still bearing witness to the exceptional natural beauty of the place and its abundant endowments. It is the land which looks like heaven where charm can affect all human senses and never cease to endow man with its fabulous gifts. She longs for a cup of the sweet juice made of the delicious African grapevine hoping that this drink could help her forget the distilled bitterness she is suffering from at the hands of racists.

Furthermore, Angelou knew that allowing frustration to tighten its nasty grip on the dreams of black Americans meant the burial of their strife for emancipation and equality. Consequently, she took it upon herself to fight against any feeling of hopelessness that could penetrate into the hearts of her people. The task was fulfilled eloquently in her poem "Caged Bird". Pinkney emphasizes that, in this work, "the entrapped bird is a symbol of the enslavement of black people through history" (25). Throughout this literary text, the author holds a comparison between a free bird and a caged one. One can notice the big difference between them. Whereas the former can get limitless enjoyment and happiness, the latter has been immersed in bottomless suffering.

However, it was not the aim of Angelou to spread the spirit of pessimism among her people. Beegle affirms that the renowned African American writer's "works and teachings projected an attitude of strength ...rather than [weakness]... hope rather than despair" (27). Consequently, the caged bird has to sing for the hope of freedom that can be attained one day. This miserable bird should not dispense with the dream of emancipation which can be fulfilled sooner or later:

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 (Angelou 194).

The lesson is meant here to be taught to the writer's fellow-black citizens. They are encouraged in the poem not to lose hope. The advice for them is never to let go their dream of freedom. They should stick firmly to optimism which constitutes the first step on the way to win the struggle against racial segregation.

Likewise, in a very impressive poem entitled "I'll Arise", Angelou announces her relentless resolution of resisting and defying the despicable fetters of racism. She has decided to blossom "like a beautiful flower...[and rise] above her troubled and impoverished" life (Brown 201). She also asserts her people's firm intention to rise above all sorts of racial practices. Stoically, she states that, despite all the oppression inflicted upon them, blacks will defeat all the attempts to drown them in self-underestimation or to consent to the efforts of humiliating them. These down-trodden men, she points out, will emerge victoriously just like the sun when coming out of the dark veils of clouds:

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.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise (Angelou 163).

The unhesitant resolution to continue resisting racial discrimination and oppression till realizing equality, freedom and justice is quite clear throughout the whole poem.

In addition, the spirit of defiance raised in the face of racists is extended to overwhelm the whole atmosphere of the poem "I'll Arise". According to her, all the efforts exerted by racists to destroy her people throughout the history of America proved to be futile. This can be noticed through the poet's words quoted by Bader in his argument:

"In all my work, in the movies I write, the lyrics, the poetry, the prose, the essays," Angelou explained in a 1990 interview for *Paris Review*, "I am saying that we may encounter many defeats—maybe it's imperative that we encounter the defeats—but we are much stronger than we appear to be, and maybe much better than we allow ourselves to be". (4)

Just as blacks' predecessors survived the torment and injustice inflicted on them at the hands of their white masters, Angelou's generation seemed to be insistent on breaking the chains of racism. The poet assures that her people will be like an ocean which could contain all the tides of racial prejudice. The repetition of the words 'I'll arise' emphasizes the determination of the speaker to rise above her agony and pain. The expression 'I'll arise' is beautifully used to indicate the poet's intention to change her both physical and spiritual position and stand up or more accurately rise up leaving frustration and the state of passiveness. It can be safely pointed out here that the pronoun 'I' used in the poem refers both to the poet herself and her whole race.



Similarly, in one of her greatly expressive poems "One More Round," Angelou makes it quite clear that she, like almost all black people, is ready to work hard all the time but she can never tolerate toiling like a slave in heartless whites' businesses. The bitter experiences of Angelou in the field of work started very early in her life. Koyana argues:

From the very beginning of her experiences as a teenage mother, Angelou wrestles with the need to work to provide for her baby. Given her racial and class background, it should come as no surprise that Angelou's experience of motherhood is so inseparably intertwined with work. (35) Consequently, the prominent black author gives examples of resilient black people who never grumbled about hard work.

In the above-mentioned literary text, the speaker's parents, for instance, used to spare no effort at work without uttering a single word of complaining. Like her fellow-black Americans, the speaker herself was always ready to toil at work patiently until the end of life. Simultaneously, she by no means had the intention of leading her life as a slave. She writes:

I was born to work but I ain't no mule.  
I was born to work up to my grave  
But I was not born  
To be a slave (Angelou 156).

Only what Afro-Americans need is fair wages and respect. In this way, the author draws attention to another form of slavery which was imposed on them by their fellow-whites. This happened when racially prejudiced rich whites made coloured men work very hard for long hours for petty wages. It was a fact that black Americans were ready to spare no effort to participate in building their country but they wanted business owners to treat them as human beings. Hence, the writer expresses her people's refusal to be treated as either animals or slaves.

Despite all their sorrows, pains and afflictions, black Americans, as Angelou stresses, were firmly intent on smiling and feeling happy. They decisively tended to behave stoically in the face of their misery and suffering. However intolerable their life could be, they never deserted their happiness. This stoic attitude can be overtly seen in the poem "Why Are They Happy?" Thus, Angelou urges Negro Americans to

Skin back your teeth, damn you,  
wiggle your ears,  
laugh while the years  
race  
down your face (Angelou 237).

The writer sees that behaving stoically is a good way blacks can resort to if they want to outlive the injustice inflicted on them by whites in America. She decisively conveys to her people "the power of endurance and hope" (Townes 581). Coloured people have to keep their spirits up and scorn their destiny. They should also cling to hope firmly and believe that their bright dawn will necessarily come sooner or later. Commenting on this attitude asserted by the black poet, Townes writes, "Angelou ... taught ... [all human beings including her own race that] ....it is important to never give up on hope, and it is a tragedy to live our lives in despair" (580). To imbue these people with the spirit of optimism was one of the main objectives the writer attempted to fulfill through her poetry (Smith 42). Amidst their anguish, they must not cease to believe that they are morally better than their oppressors and that blacks' cause is fair.

Satirizing white racists who despised their black fellows and kept underestimating their abilities and their prideful heritage, Angelou wrote "Ain't That Bad". In this poem, the author continues iterating the word 'bad' used by racists to describe coloured people and to underscore their various good abilities. Consequently, the writer speaks about the great

talents of black Americans in different types of art. Then, she asks racists if these people's artistic works are bad:

Hearin' Stevie Wonder  
 Cookin' beans and rice  
 Goin' to the opera  
 Checkin' out Leontyne Price.  
 Get down, Jesse Jackson  
 Dance on, Alvin Ailey  
 Talk, Miss Barbara Jordan  
 Groove, Miss Pearlle Bailey.  
 Now ain't they bad?  
 An' ain't they Black? (Angelou 165)

The ironical tone is quite overt in the poem. While she is describing her race's customs in a negative way that represents whites' attitude, she just means the opposite. Commenting on this poem, Rani says:

The word 'Bad' is used in poem many times. It is used in a positive sense, emphasizing the culture of the people. Maya is of the views that their culture is unique. (6)

Angelou seems to wonder whether racists are blind and ignorant because they dare to miss the great talent of those men indicated in the poem. Also, mentioning the names of famous black figures such as 'Stevie Wonder' and 'Jesse Jackson' was meant by the poet not only to honour these men but also to urge her people "to recognize their [own] individual value" (Glass 380). She additionally satirizes racists and simply tells them that their underestimation of African Americans stems from their racial prejudice and their antagonistic feelings. Hatred makes man blind.

It is noteworthy that Angelou was not only proud of her black origins only but also even more of her gender. Historically speaking, "the interconnections between ...the civil rights movement and women's liberation" could never be overlooked (Feldstein 26). As a Negro female, "Angelou succeeded in exhibiting her life ...with pride and pleasure" (Sasidher and Lakshmi 76). She believed that African American women were more capable of resisting the bitter life imposed on their families at

the hands of white Americans than coloured men. These strong willed women seemed to have descended from ancient mythology. Besides all their toil at home taking care of children, managing their household affairs with very meager amounts of money, and protecting their families from falling apart, these legendary women used to support their husbands while confronting whites' oppression. In "Amoebaeon For Daddy," the poet sheds light on such a type of black wives who does not want her husband to submit to whites' arrogance or accept their humiliation. Accordingly, an Afro-American woman addresses her husband who works as a waiter on a train, telling him to

Stand up straight, he shamed her  
In the big house  
(Bought from tips)... (Angelou 190).

Self-pride is quite clear in the words of the black wife who does not want her man to tolerate his humiliation even if it comes as the only available way to earn the family's living. He should never kneel in front of any one. The extract above is imbued with the spirit of dignity and pride.

To encourage black Americans to resist oppression and racism, Angelou was keen on commemorating the glorious memories of the forefathers who bore the terrible yoke of slavery, survived the poisonous stings of racism and fought for the freedom of their race. The poem "To a Freedom Fighter" celebrates the spirit of resistance of Negroes in America:

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 (Angelou 37).  
The path to freedom was never a smooth one for the coloured forefathers.

These Negroes were astonishingly able to survive all sorts of oppression

inflicted on them throughout the different stages of American history. The torch of liberty was never put out in their hearts however limitless their agony was. These predecessors' patience, resistance and strife managed to vanquish racists' prejudice and inhumanity. In this respect, the poet could be safely called "a 'spirit leader' which seems a most apt description of the role she" played in the lives of her people (Griffin 7). She herself was one of the black freedom fighters who were spared no effort to guide their descendants to get rid of the yoke of racism and attain both equality and liberty.

To conclude, Maya Angelou's poetry acts as a sincere mirror which manages to reflect the two sides of black Americans' experience throughout their history. The poet noticeably sheds much light on Afro-Americans' torment and oppression due to racism as well as their resistance and strife for the sake of emancipation and equality. Both the sorrowful and happy sides of blacks' living conditions in America are successfully illustrated in Angelou's poems. While handling sorrowfully the different types of persecution inflicted on her people, the poet emphasizes her keenness on imbibing the spirit of defiance and resistance inside them. She spares no effort to urge her fellow-blacks to strive for their freedom and to survive their agony. As shown above, the poet takes advantage of the events she went through in her own personal life as a way to enable herself to reflect on the general living conditions of her people. As a result, readers can see how the writer moves from what is private to black Americans' public affairs. Her poetry exposes brilliantly how the author's firm attitude of resistance and strife which she adopted in her life seems to be extended to imbue all coloured Americans' public living conditions.

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