

## Analysing Resistance Elements in the Poems of Maya Angelou

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**Abstract.** African American poet and memoirist Maya Angelou (1928–2014) is well renowned for her autobiographical book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and her lengthy poem "On the Pulse of Morning," which she recited during President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993. As a modern-day Black writer, she distinctively blends personal experience, cultural understanding, and cultural awareness into her artwork on a regular basis. African American themes of self-discovery, progress, and survival are explored in her poetry. Angelou is motivated to eliminate the division between dominant and subaltern cultures and reform the cultural hierarchy because of the suffering that White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture, the hegemonic culture, has done upon African Americans.

**Key words:** African American, poetry, cultural identity, resurrection, self, personal experience, resistance, progress, public recognition.

**Introduction:** The purpose of this article is to examine Maya Angelou's poetry, with a focus on how the concept of self-actualization appears throughout her works. It may be investigated from two different angles. Initially, she highlights the problems with African Americans' cultural identities by illustrating their experiences and lifestyles. Africans were driven to identify with the new culture and break away from their home culture by slave traffickers. Their sense of self was warped and their cultural identity was endangered as a result. Civil rights were progressively granted to African Americans following the liberation of black slaves. Even yet, African Americans continued to be excluded in their own culture and forced out of mainstream society.

She performed "On the Pulse of Morning" in 1993, Maya Angelou's poetry has not received enough attention, despite the critical and public recognition that her autobiographies have brought her. (Still, a lot of Angelou's admirers consider her first and foremost a poet and then an autobiographer). Elsie B. Washington, a reviewer, referred to Angelou as "the black woman's poet laureate" and her poetry as "the anthems of African Americans." Despite receiving both favorable and unfavorable evaluations, Maya Angelou stands out as an African American poet and memoirist by always incorporating cultural knowledge into her work. Angelou speaks up, carrying on the legacy of Hughes, who uses poetry to forge a new African American identity and a strong sense of self. The Mysterious Cultural Identity of African Americans According to Guerin "an ambivalent consciousness arising from bicultural identity".

**LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODS :** Her art consistently captures the reality that African Americans often face barriers to full acceptance by mainstream culture within the context of white supremacist culture. African Americans invariably come across enigmatic cultural identities as they struggle between preserving their African culture and adopting Anglo-Saxon culture. Angelou's poem "Africa" paints a vivid image of the colonization of Africa. The poem depicts colonized Africa as a woman robbed of her children, injured by cruel "brigands," and left alone and despondent. Angelou uses the setting of an awful heist to highlight the terrible crimes committed by western invaders, including "taking her young girls / selling her strong sons." Ex-Africans were unable to connect with

their roots and struggled to survive in their new environment. In "When I Think About Myself," Angelou uses a satirical tone to express the bitterness of unfair treatment: "The tales they tell sound like lying / they grow the fruit / But eat the rind" According to Neubauer "Song for the Old Ones" explores the suffering of black people pushed into subjugation, their guilt for taking too much, and their struggle for existence. According to Paul Dunbar (1984), Africans live in the harsh conditions of American plantations by "wearing the mask"

In the poem "Song for the Old Ones," the characters meekly accept their "inferiority" and internalize it. In contrast, the character in "Caged Bird" strives to overcome racial discrimination. In this poetry, African Americans are compared to "Caged Birds," while their oppressed ethnic tradition is represented by "clipped wings." Their culture and practices have been largely eradicated due to conflicts with the prevailing culture. Ex-Africans may experience cultural identity loss due to Anglo-American norms and loss of African culture, as Angelou (1994) describes. The "caged bird" aspires to be free and "sings / With a terrified thrill." Similarly, African Americans strive to discover their true identity and break free from obscurity. "The Caged Bird Sings of Freedom" .Ex-Africans may experience cultural identity loss due to Anglo-American norms and loss of African culture [Angelou, 1994, p. 194]. The "caged bird" aspires to be free and "sings / With a terrified thrill." Similarly, African Americans seek to discover their true identity and break free from obscurity. "The caged bird sings of liberation." One of Angelou's responsibilities is to expose the hypocrisy of white supremacy. In a white-centered society, African Americans are influenced by dominant cultural ideals that portray whites as virtuous and beautiful and blacks as immoral and unattractive. Gutman (1977) stated that African-Americans often have a negative self-image due to feelings of worthlessness [p.534].

The "zero image" poses a danger to African Americans' self-esteem and personal fulfillment. Angelou's poetry "Kin" exposes the deceptive foreign value by stating, "You battled to die, thinking / In destruction lies the seed / Of birth..." [Angelou, 1994, page 158]. In "Savior," Angelou addresses the complicated feelings of marginalized black people: "Your children, burdened with disbelief, dazzled by a patina of knowledge" [Angelou, 1994, p. 250]. In the end, the poet satirizes the warped worth of white people, saying, "We mourn for you / Although we have lost / Your name" (p. 250). In "Just Like Job," Angelou satirizes foolish ideals.

**RESULTS AND ANALYSIS:** During slavery, blacks contributed significantly to the alien nation while living in deplorable conditions. As Angelou states, "When my blanket was nothing but dew, rags and bones were all I possessed." Despite their desire for a fair standing in the place where they had dedicated their lives ("My life offer I freely to Thee / Deep rivers ahead / High mountains above" (p.172), the white culture did not provide them with such a position, leaving them perplexed and afraid: "But anxieties swarm about like wolves in the dark. Have You forgotten my name?" The Constitution served as motivation for the freed slaves. They were never able to realize their dream, though. Rather, the majority of them were forced to reside in ghettos where they continued to struggle with unemployment, racial prejudice, and poverty. This reality is reflected in the playground cry "Harlem Hopscotch": "Since you "Black, leave now. / Food's gone, rent's due. / Cry and curse, then leap two" [Angelou, 1994, p. 51]. The unalienable rights of "every American" to pursue pleasure, equality, and prosperity never appear to be realized in their lives. Therefore, it is nothing less than a delusion for African Americans to be fully incorporated into the mainstream of white culture.

**Awakening of the Dark Self** According to DuBois (1994), "this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (p. 191) is what the history of African Americans in America is all about. "A kind of awakening, the emergence of a repressed truth from the recesses of oppressive cultural systems" is how DuBois described the realization of self-consciousness [Gikandi, 2005]. By dedicating her life to the restoration of the black self, Angelou further demonstrates her strong commitment in bolstering African Americans' cultural identity. Therefore, a major theme in Angelou's writings is embracing and honoring black identity. As demonstrated by Angelou's poetry, the attempt to reconstruct the black self entails a cultural practice of redefining and recasting black identity.

The former Africans lost all contact with their forefathers and their native culture while arriving in the other place. One of the only things that connected them to their motherland's culture was their true names, their original names. Their African names served as a symbol of their cultural identity, a representation of their shared identity or the way they were seen by society. For their own convenience, the white conquerors originally gave the former Africans new names. The controlled ex-Africans were gradually dehumanized by the dominators by calling them a variety of derogatory names.

Acceptance of these names also denotes recognition of zero images and submission to the dominant white culture. In fact, their names can accurately convey how they feel about themselves. Poems like "When I Think About Myself," "Request," and "Our Grandmothers" feature African Americans without given names. African Americans used to be treated like animals, as seen by the titles given to them by their white oppressors in "Our Grandmothers": "nigger, nigger bitch, heifer, / mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon, / whore, hot tail, thing, it" [Angelou, 1994, p.256]. The characters in "Request" reject the zero pictures rather than acquiescing to the names in a passive manner. In the poem, Angelou mockingly refers to African Americans as young "bastards" who are cast aside and without social standing. Like the young person portrayed in the poem who was harmed by his or her lack of legal status. African Americans endure negative stereotypes and suffer much from their aberrant identities. Angelou articulates the African American community's ongoing need for affirming cultural identities in this instance, saying, "Give a legal name to beg from / for the first / time of its life" [Angelou, 1994, p. 83].

**DISCUSSION:** "The Calling of Names" and "Our Grandmothers" both fully illustrate the act of self-entitlement. African Americans' political identities in "The Calling of Names" go from "African, Colored, and Negro to Black" along with their names [Angelou, 1994, p. 46]. It was impossible to treat Americans like regular people: "He went to being called a colored man / after answering to 'hey, nigger'" (p. 46). They do, however, acquire their new social standing as a result of their racial awakening: "From colored man to Negro / With the N in caps" (p. 46). The renaming is a real transformation, and this process is a "big step" toward African Americans' freedom. In order to increase her people's consciousness of their black identity, Angelou uses her poetry to represent new Black communities that are entirely distinct from the clichéd "Uncle-Toms." These figures show how the previously dehumanized black identity has been elevated, the once feeble self-awareness has been reinforced.

Previously negative, now positive self-image. Poetry collections by Angelou include "One More Round," "Weekend Glory," and "Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition." Angelou depicts a number of African Americans from the working class in these poems who voluntarily embrace their black identity and change the negative self-images they earlier had. By doing this, Angelou helps to bring about the natural redefining of the black person as a new, whole person who lives in a completely different social space rather than as someone who is excluded.

"Weekend Glory" fatherly portrays an African American lady who is confident in her self-image and takes pride in being black: "They should study me on Saturday night if they want to learn how to live life right" [Angelou, 1994, p. 206]. They are guaranteed the same rights as White people to live happy, fulfilling lives. This character knows full well that her cultural power and resourcefulness come from being black. Furthermore, the strength of the culture allows for a reversal of power and changes the perception of the White race, which was previously seen as weak and inferior.

By portraying African American bourgeoisie in opposition to the white homogenizing society, Angelou expresses her profound worry. Some African Americans in the middle class decide to give up their traditional black philosophy and embrace white principles in order to advance in the white dominant society.

In "Sepia Fashion Show," Maya Angelou plays the stereotypical African American bourgeoisie, driven to sacrifice their rich cultural heritage for the sake of social development by moving up the social ladder. They depart from their mother culture in order to participate in the white society:

According to Angelou [1994, p. 48], "The Black Bourgeois, who all say "yah" / when yeah is what they're meaning." They still have a lower social standing than White people, as the poem suggests.

The loss of black uniqueness and the commitment to societal conformity are what make one white. Tragically, the African American bourgeoisie in the poem don't understand that, despite their best efforts to integrate into white society more broadly, they will still be excluded rather than completely accepted by white mainstream society. They don't seem to see that they can't be as equal as the white bourgeoisie and be a part of their social circles in the white-dominated society.

Obviously, Angelou is praising the new generation of Black Americans who embrace their black identity, adhere to black consciousness, and oppose the prevailing ideology by drawing comparisons between the self-denied bourgeoisie and the self-accepted working-class African Americans.

### **Conclusion**

After seeing the terrible effects that the dominant culture has on marginalized groups' growth, Maya Angelou commits her time to promoting a more positive cultural environment. She returns to the oppressive in her poems. memories accumulated over generations by African Americans. African Americans are able to thrive in a foreign environment by upholding their African culture. Angelou works hard to redefine blackness in an attempt to regain her people's identity and self-consciousness. They are able to reinvent themselves and get to know themselves fully by absorbing themselves into the culture of their ancestors. By doing this, she lifts African Americans off the margins and preserves ethnic culture. As a result, Maya Angelou is a cultural poet who successfully carries out the cultural transmission mission.

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