



Revisiting Maya Angelou's Poetry: Rediscovering Identity and Self-Acceptance

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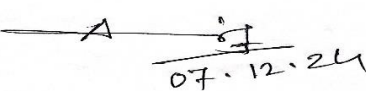
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The thesis is submitted to the Department of English, Daffodil International University, during the fall semester, 2024 for the partial fulfillment of Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in English.

Certificate of Completion

By this certification, I attest that Nisa Akter, with student ID number 211-10-2350, 19th batch in the Department of English, Daffodil International University, has successfully completed the prerequisites for her thesis paper, which is a component of ENG 431: Project Paper with Internship. I served as her supervisor for the Fall 2024 semester, with the main focus of her work being the production of academic thesis. This work is genuine, in my opinion, and she independently contributed to it while looking to a variety of sources for help, which she appropriately recognizes in her research. It would not have been feasible without her courage, reliability and courage. I am incredibly appreciative of Nisa Akter's outstanding work, which significantly adds to the body of scholarly research. She is one of the few students in her batch to have finished an academic thesis of this level, and for that, I sincerely admire her. It has been a pleasure working with her, and I believe that her admirations, courage and skills will lead to great success in the future.



07.12.24

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Declaration

I, Nisa Akter, hereby declare that I have carefully read all the guidelines for project paper submission that is given by Department of English, Daffodil International University. I voluntarily accept all the mentioned terms and conditions. My thesis titled “Revisiting Maya Angelou’s Poetry: Rediscovering Identity and Self-Acceptance,” is my original work to the field of theories. During this study, I consulted with necessary and relevant sources and cite to complete this study.

Throughout the research process, I consulted with relevant and necessary sources and it has been properly cited and referenced. This project is completed under the guidance and supervision of **Mr. Md. Ariful Islam Laskar**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, during the Fall 2024 semester. It is done for the requirements of my Bachelor of Arts (Honors) in English. I further affirm that, this paper nor any piece of it has not been submitted anywhere else for degree, scholarship or other type of publication.

I accept full responsibility for the content and authenticity of this work.



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Nisa Akter

Date:

Abstract

This study revisits Maya Angelou's poetry to scrutinize identity and self-acceptance. This paper explores black female identity, woman empowerment and self-worth through the lens of black feminism and intersectionality. Maya Angelou becomes the marginalized voice for her black community to dismantle stereotypes. Through her writing, she uses her powerful voice for her black people. Women are more repressed and isolated from the patriarchal society. In her poetry she represented gender, inequality, racism, and raised her voice against injustice and societal norms. By capturing Angelou's journey towards self-love and individuality, this paper shows how it becomes personal to universal journey and celebrates individuality, self-consciousness, self-confidence and dignity.

In American society black women are extremely exploited. Maya concerns those who still struggle for their identity and self-discovery. This paper highlights how to break traditional narratives about black women, gender and race. It also shows how Angelou unveiled herself through her writings by proudly accepting herself as a black American woman with her resilience. Angelou's poetry "Caged Bird", "Equality", "Woman Work", "Still I Rise", and "Phenomenal Woman"- explores the way to get rid of racism, exploitation, identical crises and rise with audacity. Through her poetry she wants to convey her life experience, as a result, her poetry intertwined with her personal life. In this paper I will show how Angelou's poetry revisits personal empowerment and rediscovers the self-essence, inner voice, path to individuality.

Key word: Maya Angelou, Black female identity, gender and race, inequality, patriarchy, injustice, self-discovery.

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Chapter-01

Introduction

Maya Angelou, a legendary figure who lives her whole life in her own terms and her uniqueness is the strength for the voiceless submissive black women. She is able to firmly establish herself as an African-American woman in this society of patriarchal racial discrimination. In this society of discrimination, women were still backward, but as the condition of an African American woman is more deplorable, they suffer from an extreme identity crisis and at one point lose their identity and continue in the so-called stream of society.

Maya Angelou is most notable for her powerful voice for race, inequality and black womanhood that she has faced. She is not only a poet but also a playwright, actress, civil rights activists, director and so on. At the age of 17 she gave birth to a son and married twice. Her parents were separated when she was a child. She faced caste discrimination from childhood, not only that but her most traumatic experience as a girl was rape at the age of seven and a half. The rapist was arrested but the police found him dead after being released. The situation makes Maya more depressed and guilt that the man died because of her voice raise. As a child and traumatic experience, she decides to stop speaking but as a writer, a poet she finds herself and ultimately her voice. But nothing can stop this powerful lady. Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a local educator, encouraged Maya into reciting poetry and reading. During these five years she read all the books in the black school library as well as the books available in the white school library and she memorized Edgar Allan Poe all the poetry, Shakespeare, James Weldon Johnson. No one had told the story of black women like this before, never so powerfully.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." (King "I have a dream") Angelou believes in creating an equal nation where black and whites will be seen as equal and men and women will also be seen as equal. She was inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr because he talks about freedom and justice.

Several studies have explored racism, voice of Africa's, feminism, social identity, cultural differences, resistance and social inequalities. For instance, this could include unexplored themes or alternative approaches. Salih, Dhefah O and A.H Muhammad are examining black

women's identity through Tajfel's social identity theory. They found cultural identities and social injustice on black women in an anti-black society. For instance, Sumit Kumar sought to investigate the colonized Africa and how women are dehumanized and marginalized. In addition, the previous studies are limited because they only focus on the broader aspects of feminism, identity and racism. Despite extensive research on these themes in Maya's poetry, there has been less focus on how she creates her own essence and how she accepts herself. In this study, I will discover women's own identity as a person and how Maya as a woman accepts herself and goes with her own flow.

Feminism is about a socio-political movement that establishes equality of the sexes, fight against patriarchal society and breaks the stereotypes. "Feminism is a social enterprise, a moral and political framework-concerned with redressing social wrongs." (Thompson 7) Ever since the feminist movement started various stereotypes are being broken and women are being established in the society. Despite all this, women are being humiliated, isolated and suppressed in various ways. However, they fail to criticize the intersectionality of race, class, sexuality and gender. Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes black women experience in a unique way where black women define their own identities, empowerment and resilience that challenges stereotypes. Collins said in an interview "controlling images that have been applied to black women". Maya Angelou tries to show the power of this controlling image and how it holds them back through her poetry "Caged Bird", "Still I Rise", "Phenomenal Woman", "Woman Work" and "Equality".

Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in her insightful 1989 essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." The concept of intersectionality is not an abstract notion but a description of the way multiple oppressions are experienced. (Smith 1)

Intersectionality is an important methodological tool that enables us to identify differences and multiple perspectives. If "Black" is used as an umbrella term to collectivise women from visible minority backgrounds then through an intersectional analysis differences can be identified between the issues faced by and experiences of Indian feminism, Chinese feminism, and so on across ethnic, cultural and religious lines. (Arya 559)

“Caged Bird” poem explores the themes of freedom, gender, identity and race. “Still I Rise” is about resilience, resistance to oppression and empowerment. “Phenomenal Woman” shows womanhood, self- love and self- acceptance. “Woman Work” talks about endless labor and the pressure of women. “Equality” reveals gender and racial inequalities.

This study investigates Maya Angelou's poetry that reveals black women's identity and established self-love that drives into self-acceptance. This introduces intersectionality of race, class and gender and how it can help to create a person's own essence. By analyzing her poetry, we discover how black women challenge societal oppression and sexual inequalities. It acknowledges the deeper understanding that shapes black women's own essence.

1.1. Background Context of the study:

Scholar and famous author Maya Angelou known as Marguerite Ann Johnson born in 1928. She experienced poverty, racism, sexual violence, injustice and single motherhood at the early age. She is best known for her autobiography “I know why the caged bird sings” which covers her traumatic and struggling childhood life. She started writing in her childhood such as essays, poetry. African American feminist critics highlight a number of techniques used by authors such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, who most effectively highlight the black experience. Actress, producer, director, poet, writer, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou is African American. She receives international attention and admiration with her autobiography, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," which documents her life up until the age of 17. In her memoirs, she discussed the hard reality of life for a young Black girl, challenging the idea of white superiority. This was the first of six autobiographical novels in the series. Her topics include feminism, race, family, and identity issues. The first script written by an African American for the movie Georgia. Her topics include feminism, race, family, and identity issues. She wrote the first African American screenplay for the movie Georgia, Georgia, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Angelou is not only a writer but also a civil rights activist who joins Harlem writers Guild in 1959 that supports Black authors writings. Civil rights refer to basic human rights that are protected by the government. Civil rights movement is a social justice movement that began

after World War II, from the 1950s to the 1960s to gain equality and justice. After the civil war there has been discrimination against black community people who faced racism in every sector. They were neglected for the White Americans. It was a non-violent protest where black people fought for their legal rights as citizens of a nation. But still black people were struggle and neglected.

However, the discrimination has existed since the beginning of history for black people, especially black women. They have been left out of the list since the beginning of the feminism movement. First wave feminism primarily focuses on suffrage movement, legal rights and economic independence for middle- and upper-class people. It is not focused on all class people especially women and intersectionality. It also did not recognize racial inequalities, prejudices and struggles of all women. Second wave feminism establishing more broadly and focuses on equality in the workplace, sexual violence, women liberation, family and reproductive rights. Third wave feminism acknowledged individuality and intersectionality. The discrimination has started from the colonial period when colonizers drew a line for black color people and marginalized them. Colonizers established the theory I and Others which indicates subtle racial discrimination. Black sees themselves through the eyes of Whites as White spreads prejudices about black all over the world that they are ugly, savage, uneducated, uncivilized. Blacks have been oppressed since the beginning of history. Women are being exploited by the male society and black women's condition is worse. At every level of society, men have considered it their sole right to confine women to the boundaries of the house. The scenario of black women- “Am I woman first” or “Am I black first”? However black women are still subordinate. In literature, the portrayal of black women is strong. In the civil rights movement black women took the place of leadership, writers and authors like Gwendolyn Brooks and Lorraine Hansberry portrayed black women as the central and significant figure in their writing. For the first time blacks break social prejudices through their unique writing style and powerful words. Maya Angelou also becomes a central writer who portrays black women's lives from an intersectional lens. Her poetry and autobiography explore self-worth and individuality within society.

1.2. Research Objectives:

1. To assess how Angelou overcomes traditional challenges and establishing own identity.
2. To explore as a black woman, how Angelou portrays self-acceptance through her writing.
3. To investigate how Angelou's poetry addresses equality, inequality and social justice.

1.3. Research Questions:

1. How does Angelou's poetry intertwine with her personal experiences?
2. Why do women feel the identity crisis and the impact of patriarchy?
3. How does Angelou promote black womanhood and self-essence in her writing?

1.4. Limitations of the Study:

This study is limited to only five poems of Maya Angelou which ignores the vast area of work she has. Although these five poems have a wide range of themes, feelings, expressions and emotions. The study will focus on rediscovering identity and self-acceptance in Angelou's poetry "Caged Bird", "Equality", "Woman Work", "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman".

1.5. Identity and Self-Acceptance in Literature:

Identity word derived from the French word 'Identite' meaning 'the same'. Identity is the combination of both mind and body part of the personality. Psychologically, identity is personality, qualities, beliefs, looks, thoughts and expressions that makes a person. Identity in the American sense, targets the uniqueness and individuality that makes a person distinct from others. It is an accomplishment and fragmentary. It is stable and fixed aspect of selfhood.

In literature, identity encompasses the multifaceted aspects that contribute to an individual's sense of self and how they perceive their place in the world. It involves the exploration of various factors, such as personal experiences, cultural background, social roles, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and individual characteristics, which shape and define an individual's identity in the context of literature, identity is often portrayed through the depiction of characters and their journeys of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-definition. Authors utilize various narrative techniques, such as character development, introspection, and interplay

with external circumstances, to delve into the complexities of identity formation and expression Literature offers a platform to explore the fluidity and evolution of identity. (Chiranjeevi 585)

Self-acceptance is the state of understanding and accepting inner self without any hesitation or judgement. Self-acceptance is the term which accepts one's weakness and strength as well. It represents recognizing the personal value, attributes and actions.

Identity crisis is a crucial state of an individual's life when they experience any confusion about who they are. Identity crisis occurs because of stress, trauma, social or cultural pressure, mental pressure or when a person prompt questions about self-discovery, personal values. If a person feels isolated, alienated from the society then it might be one of the main reasons to occur identity crisis. Hence, identity is important for a person's life as it holds one's individuality.

Self-acceptance and one's true self can overcome identity crisis. When an individual knows all attributes of their personality then they can find self-consciousness and confidence in themselves which helps to overcome the fear of identity crisis. Self-love provide strength, power, positivity and encourages authenticity. It can relief external and internal conflict. This can reform one's true self. To reduce self-doubt and fear allows to build a strong and healthy identity. Self-love helps to establish and reinforce self-discovery, self-empowerment and fosters inner peace. In the process of identity formation self-acceptance enabling to integrate experience.

Self-acceptance and identity are important themes in literature as it provides a space for individuals to explore their inner self and fight against internal and external conflict. Kamala Das a notable poet addresses sexuality, personal identity, inner struggles, women sufferings, struggles, societal and individual desires, personal freedom in her writing. In her poetry "An Introduction" she investigates self-identity and freedom of speech. She challenges traditional norms and patriarchy. In "The Old Playhouse" she explores the loss of identity and individuality as a woman. How women's desire are being neglected. As a woman, what is their role according to society is decided. She also describes her search for self-empowerment, freedom, and identity in her book "My Story.

Additionally, in "The Guide" by R.K Narayan, Rosie is a central character who search for her own respectful identity as a woman in the world. Her desire to break all the shackles from

herself and rise with her own flow. Dance is her only passion and she has also a typical marriage life where society, husband are not supportive, where they tried to pull her down. Hence, she explores how to hold one's passion and lastly, she established herself as a dancer in front of whole world. This is how literature explores the internal and external challenges. In literature, both self-acceptance and identity have significant role.

Chapter-02

Methodology

This research is a qualitative study which analyzed literary text of Maya Angelou. This study investigates identity and self-acceptance are portrayed in Angelou's five poems. In order to provide context, it will also follow secondary sources such as scholarly papers and research articles. Through the lens of black feminism and intersectionality, this study will help to explore why one's personal identity is important to shape an individual that Angelou portrayed in her five poems "Caged Bird", "Equality", "Woman Work", "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman". Thus, it is believed that this method will help the study to lead forward.

2.1. Literature Review:

This section gives a summary of the research papers and articles that are related to the five poems of Maya Angelou. First, the researcher checked what kind of work has been done and what kind of work has not been completed on the poems of Maya Angelou. Then the researcher thought to analyses the five poems about their themes which are related to self-acceptance and identity. While discussing, it was found that Maya Angelou mostly focuses on self-expression and how identity formed in a patriarchal society. Hence, black feminism and intersectionality theory is taken which corresponds to the poems.

This study will investigate how Angelou portrays self-acceptance through her writing and how she overcomes traditional challenges and establishing own identity. This will explore equality and social justice. Moreover, apart from all these things, Maya Angelou wants to give her voice to the voiceless women in her community. She becomes the rainbow in the cloud for those submissive women. Many scholars have examined Maya Angelou's poetry in different

perspectives. Numerous scholarly articles and research papers have been written about Maya Angelou's poetry, but most of them focus on feminist perspectives, resistance, race and gender, sexuality and identity. Nonetheless, researchers are also concentrating on social and cultural identity of Maya Angelou's verse. For instance, Mamuna Ghani and Bushra Naz have diverse perspectives on racism, feminism and representation. It addresses national, racial and lingual identity. She also focuses on masculinity, self and other, inferiority. As an American Negro female, how Maya Angelou fighting against white hatred and masculine prejudice. Dr. Usha Jain and Nobert Solomon shed light on the oppression and resilience of self-esteem. It will explore the harsh realities of Blacks in White society. It also addresses self-identity, feminism and masculinity. Research scholar Saikat Guha examined Angelou's voice as a liberating song to summon a new era. Hasan Hadi Ali and Ali Kareem suggests that Angelou's works are a reflection of the African-American womanhood. It also focuses on the female voice and identity. Additionally, in addition, Shokhan Mohammed Fatah's study, "I'm a Woman Phenomenally": Black Women Empowerment in Selected Poems of Maya Angelou," noted that, as an African American woman author, Maya Angelou challenges white prejudice and misconceptions while showcasing the strength and power of black women. White people think Black women are less intelligent and attractive than white women. Because her poems depict a subjugated Black person and an oppressed woman who refuses to accept injustices and defends her rights, she wishes to communicate that being a Black woman deepens the study. In this study, I will investigate how her poetry intertwined with her personal experience and how identity is constructed in a patriarchal dominant world. Additionally, how her poetry promotes black womanhood and self-essence. That is why black feminism and intersectionality theory is needed to understand identity and self-acceptance.

Chapter-03

The role of identity in individuals' life

Identity plays a vital role in individuals' life. It encompasses race, gender, experiences and culture. Identity is the fundamental aspect for an individual to understand who they are. It embracing confidence, sense of belonging, self-concept, resilience and personal values. Identity clears all the clarity of one self and allows to live the life authentically. "Who am I" is the most common question to an individual. However, when a person find answer to this question, they can live their life on their own terms. Society plays a significant role in creating one's identity.

From childhood people live their life according to society and culture. Hence, society hold some typical stereotypes and narratives for which a person can feel superior or inferior. The construction of the society is male oriented, male dominant that is why women feel inferior in every aspect of the society. Black community women are in danger zone because society ties their individuality and freedom of speech. Maya Angelou who concerns for her black community women, she feels an invisible rope that holds them back. When person can speak against injustice, inequality freely and express all the desires and can think from her mind, not the pressure of the society then she becomes an individual person.

Imagine living a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a mission of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction. Imagine living in a world where we can all be who we are, a world of peace and possibility. Feminist revolution alone will not create such a world; we need to end racism, class elitism, imperialism. But it will make it possible for us to be fully self-actualized females and males able to create beloved community, to live together, realizing our dreams of freedom and justice, living the truth that we are all "created equal". (Hooks 2000)

Maya Angelou learned as a black girl that black has boundaries and she feels that how life will be difficult for them who quest for identity, sometimes drives into identity crisis. In black woman's life identity crisis starts from the beginning of their history. They are suffering from racism, as well as, at first, they established them as a proud black community people then black

woman. It is a long struggle and black women have the patience, courage to rebellion against white supremacy and all the injustices to gain control.

The first poem examined here is "Caged Bird," which appeared in the poet's fourth poetry collection, "Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?" in 1983. The title "Caged Bird" alludes to her 1969 autobiography, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," which is her best-known work. This poem is a powerful expression of the sufferings of black American's and their longing, struggle for their freedom and equality. As Angelou states-

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky. (Angelou 194)

In this poem free bird represents white Americans but it also represents "male", in the society male are free and they lead a life of dignity, grandeur and finite possibilities. The wind carries the free bird alone that means circumstances are favorable for the free bird, hence, for the male or men in the society. The free bird can enjoy his surroundings like dips the wing in the sun rays. The bird is able to fly unrestricted and enjoy the beauty of the world. The bird is bold enough to assert his right over everything. He has also the ability to claim the sky is his which represents limitless possibilities, resources, grandeur. A free bird is all over free and able to enjoy everything.

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. (Angelou 194)

However, caged bird represents as black Americans as well as black women who are in the cage and yearns for freedom. Black women live in a restricted and confined place which considered as cage. They have no idea about limitless possibilities or how it feels when a person is free of all restrictions and boundaries. Women only see through their “bars of rage”. It also represents racial discrimination and subjugation imposed by the hatred of the Whites. It addresses the sadness, frustration, fury and fear of the women who are tied and clipped by the society as well. Their feet and wings represent freedom which is also clipped. They live in a narrow cage, in a domestic wall.

In the third stanza, Angelou shows that the caged bird is fearful, they fear for the harassment, torture, even death. Their voice is full of fear, sings about freedom and opportunities that is denied. “Distant hill” refers the voices of black women do not reach the ears of society or men. They always ignore them as a person. In the poem “for the caged bird sings of freedom” this line indicates that they are still longing for their freedom knowing that is in a society’s cage. Angelou sings for the people those who can help them and save them from the cage. The poet stresses here that people can not be kept in cage and oppressed for long. They will struggle against all odds and express their voice.

Here, in the fourth stanza, “another breeze” symbolizes new or more opportunities. The free bird which symbolizes men, they have all opportunities to explore and knowing new things. They have a lot of possibilities that is why free bird or men can think of new or more opportunities. For white Americans and male everything is easy and convenient. This line “and he names the sky his own” indicates men has the courage to name the sky as his own. It represents the masculinity effect on the society and how society give powers to males only and how they tie women’s individuality, confidence and strength. The typical societal norms are present in every society where women feel isolated, alienated and lonely. In this poem caged bird stands on their grave of dreams which symbolizes how they keep their dreams and desires hidden. Their desires have now turned into nightmares. They can only express them through tears. If there is no dream, there is no hope. Whatever the condition is, the caged bird will still continue to sing its song of freedom. It is one kind of protest against masculinity, societal prejudices. This poem is a shining example of the plight of women in society.

The second poem “Equality” published in 1990 in the volume of poetry “I Shall not be Moved”. This poem signifies the equality of all black women and ends gender and racial inequalities.

“I” and “We” stands for Afro-Americans and “You” stands for white American’s. This poem also reveals how black women are viewed in the man’s eye and how to be equal with the others. In the first stanza, Maya uses her female voice.

You declare you see me dimly
through a glass which will not shine,
though I stand before you boldly,
trim in rank and marking time. (Angelou 232)

In this stanza, “You” also stands for society, society intentionally ignores black women and society does not see the injustices inflicted on black women, or even pretends not to see them. Angelou articulates her boldness, courage for liberation to live as woman. Angelou’s personal experience interwind with this poetry which she stands again for emancipation of African-American woman. Here, the glass symbolizes an unclear vision where society’s perspective is clouded and unclear. It creates a barrier where the male society can not see their true identity as a woman. But the speaker stands boldly and ready to speak up even society holds them back. Moreover, in the second stanza, “You do own to hear me faintly” indicates society can hear women’s cry but they hear it faintly. It represents societal ignorance where society only prioritize to men and majority of the society. Women’s voice is like a whisper which hard to hear and easy to ignore. Here, Angelou calls for equality and justice which is powerful and hard to ignore because it is like drums beat. The drums beat symbolizes calls for equality. Women’s demand for their liberation and equality is constant.

Equality, and I will be free.
Equality, and I will be free. (Angelou 232)

The line has been repeated six times to reinforce the assurance of freedom which declares that true freedom can come only with the assurance of equality. It also addresses Angelou’s quest for justice. Black people sing for equality because when it will come then they will be able to create their identity. They want to be free as it can assure their liberty in the society.

Fourth stanza clears that women are exist to fulfilling man’s desire and accused woman being a prostitute by this line “that I fly from man to man”. But who make them prostitute is the main question for those women who suffers most. Society announces women’s ways are wrong

and fallacious because they challenge societal norms. These lines “but if I'm just a shadow to you/could you ever understand” indicates society is not understanding in women’s matter. They love to accuse them without any reason because it is easy to target the weak. Women is just shadow and insignificant figure to the society which never understand women’s feelings, needs and misinterpreted them.

By these lines- “We have lived a painful history/we know the shameful past” Angelou addresses black people’s painful history which related to racial oppression and discrimination. Knowing shameful past, she keeps on moving forward and it shows women’s resilience, quest and determination. Through this stanza, she uses her female voice to demand her rights as a black woman. It becomes myth, American Dream to them to get justice and equality.

Society willfully wants to blind towards unfairness and inequality in the American society. Blinding and Padding refers how white Americans and male society dominated, exploited and oppressed black people for centuries. Angelou invites society to “Take the blinders from your vision”. Society do not confess that they have heard their crying and tears that is why the speaker addresses society by this line “and confess you've heard me crying/ and admit you've seen my tears.” They intentionally blind their eyes and ears so that they can not hear or see anything that is not acceptable. They find peace in dominating those minorities. They do not want to admit that they have heard black women’s pain as well. Their painless heart is the witness of all the injustices and inequalities.

Society is the main reason to cause identity crisis of an individual. Societal norms are the one and only law to the male dominant society where society snatches an individual’s identity by imposing their norms. “Angelou wants to break all the obstacles and Shackles of the society which is beset by the narrow domestic walls of sex, caste and racism.” (Jain Usha and Nobert Solomon 374)

To create one’s identity, we must stand against the so-called laws of society. Especially, women have to speak against all the irregularities oppression in creating identity. Starting to speak is the first step of freedom, questions should be against in justice, rights, should be taken. Freedom will not overtake women until they speak for themselves. Angelou wants a free world where everybody will be equal like Rabindranath Tagore says-

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls (Tagore “Where the mind is without fear” 1-4)

The great Rabindranath Tagore also wants an equal environment where no one is in fear and everyone's head is high. Where there will be no restrictions in education, health etc. women and men both will be free from their domestic walls or boundaries. According to Angelou, as a community we need to stand up against racism, just as women also need to speak out against society and male dominant power.

3.1. Women's position in the world of Patriarchy:

Patriarchy is the social construction that prescribes male supremacy where men considered as superior and powerful than woman. In this unjust social practice, men dominate, subordinates and oppressed women. Women are considered as product to men. They have no value in man's world because they considered as inferior in the society. Men's power-controlled women in every aspect. Men confined women to the domestic sphere, according to them, women's job is to raise children, do housework and manage the family. Women becomes to object to men whose work to fulfil men's sexual desire as well.

Beyond this limited world, there is a world of freedom for women which this society fails to provide. They also have the ability to keep pace with all levels of society. The condition of black women is even worse. They slowly began realize their worth being a woman and how to eliminate sexist oppression. Maya Angelou begins to talk about her community women. In her writing she expressed women's value in a man's world. In the world, there is no gender roles, both men and women are equal. Women have the potential to empower themselves. It shows how black women marginalized in the world of patriarchy. Social inequalities affect black women badly. Society never gives them liberty and equal rights. They are being marginalized in her community and American society. They are victims of sexual violence. In Angelou's poem “Woman Work” she addresses African-American women's duty which symbolizes all women in the world who lives in a patriarchal society. This poem reflects a mother's duty and her daily tasks. This poem explains the theme of responsibility, self-identity, desire and looking

for freedom. “Woman Work” published in 1978 in her second volume named “Traveling”. Angelou states-

I've got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry
I got company to feed
The garden to weed
I've got shirts to press
The tots to dress
The cane to be cut
I gotta clean up this hut
Then see about the sick
And the cotton to pick. (Angelou 153)

Black women's circle is limited to the narrow domestic sphere. Angelou mourns that black women are confined in their household work and responsibilities. Women's duty is confined only in household works such as- cooking, gardening, caring for children, cleaning, mopping etc. Men do not pay for their unwavering work. They will take them taken for granted because it shows a natural process. According to society, women have to do all household works and it is their only duty to take care their family members. As a mother, they take care their children as they do it better than men. But women have the potential to earn money, to follow their passion, to do a job as well as to do domestic work. Shopping, cleaning is not their only thing to do. Women have individual identity and personality. They can work along with men, rather in some fields, women do better than men. There is no reason to neglect them and confine them in boundaries. This poem shows the domestic weight of labor that society placed on women. A women's duty in her house is to shopping, cooking, moping, weeding the garden, pressing shirts and cleaning. But women have feelings, emotions and desires. They also want freedom in their confined life. Even if a woman is sick, she has to do all the household chores.

In second and third stanzas, women address nature by saying “Sine on me, sunshine/Rain on me, rain” for her comfort and relief. She uses natural elements such as- rain, wind, sky which

symbolizes freedom, peace and a relief place. Maya Angelou shows in this poem that how women forget about their daily needs and think only about their family. After a while, they also want to find their own existence by fulfilling so many responsibilities, they also want freedom for some time. How oppressions, race, gender work together in producing justice in the concept of intersectionality. Women have no respect in their marital life because male dominated them and treated them as product of desire. Black women's life is more miserable. They face racial discrimination where whites treat them as "Other" for their skin color. They had no right to study and work together with white Americans. In the situation black women's feel more alone in the world of racial discrimination and patriarchy. They want to be free; they want rest from all these domestic works, Angelou states- "'Til I can rest again". They are fully oppressed and exploited by whites and men of their society. They started to lose their identity and strength. Women needs a breathing space where they can feel free, no pressure, no duty, no responsibility. Women are looking for a place where they can be themselves, they can rest again and can call the place as their own. They find solace in nature that is why they can call all natural elements such as- sun, rain, mountain, oceans, leaf, star, moon as their own. They can pursue their own passion such as- singing, dancing, writing etc. in their own place. Because women do not have their own home in this society and they do not have any comfort zone. Women needs to establish their own identity. For masculinity effect, they started lose their identity as a woman. But in nature they find solace because it is a symbol of peace, solace, freedom, strength. Nature becomes a source of place which they can call their own. She finds empowerment and identity in nature.

Black feminism emphasizes that patriarchy operates differently for people with dark skin color. Patriarchy established gender roles in society. It expects that women should be "inferior" and men should be "superior" both in society and family. Women should be a good housewife, not an earning member of society, they should be strong and self-sacrificing women. These narratives mortified humanity and individuality of black women. Black feminism concentrates on feminist movement which overlooked black women's struggle under patriarchy.

Patriarchy privileges men in all aspects of society such as economy, politics, social or cultural aspects. But not all men benefit equally, in the same way, not all women experience patriarchy equally. It depends on race, class, gender and sexuality. Patriarchy affects individuals differently.

Black women experience patriarchy badly compared to white women because white women are considered as beautiful and black women as ugly. The color of a person can change the impact of patriarchy. On the other hand, there is a huge difference in gender and class. Middle or upper-middle class women experience patriarchy differently. Hence, they have economic stability and a respectful social circle. But poor women face highly oppression such as access to education, healthcare or in job sectors. They face a unique form of oppression because of their race and class. In healthcare, black women are denied treatment from white doctors.

Chapter-4

Accept thyself through Angelou's poetry:

According to Angelou self-acceptance is not personal, it is a collective journey of acceptance and resilience. She embraces her writing with magical words, evocative language and rhythmic structures. Her another two poems "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman" challenges stereotypes and embracing self-essence. The poem "Still I Rise" is from Maya Angelou's third collection of poetry, "And Still I Rise," which was released in 1978. Angelou States-

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. (Angelou 163)

In the first stanza, Angelou talks about historical oppression and how black women historically misinterpreted, here "you" refers white Americans who oppressed black women. "You" is also representing masculinity. White Americans are projecting negative perceptions of black Americans into the world. As well as, men always portrayed women as weak, submissive, kind-hearted. But women can be bold and strong. They can trample women into very dirt places but they will rise like "dust". Here, it symbolizes the power, stubbornness of women. Like Maya Angelou, other black authors began to represent themselves in literature. It shows black women's courage and empowerment.

In the second stanza, Angelou questions to the so-called masculinity or white Americans by this line “Does my sassiness upset you?” which shows black women’s sassiness which represents their boldness and confident does not upset them. Their confidence and boldness are like a threat to them. If minority speaks loudly then it will be a real problem for the majority. Angelou challenges societal expectations, she walks with pride that is why she uses a metaphor “oil wells” which symbolizes wealth, richness and here it represents black women’s self-worth and resilience.

Nature is the symbol of peace, power and strength. Angelou uses natural elements moons, suns, tides which symbolizes inevitability. The speaker ensures that black women’s hope, desire and feelings will rise which no one can stop. It is certain and unstoppable like nature.

But the majority do not want to see the inner beauty, inner strength of black women. Angelou celebrates blackness with pride as a black African-American Woman. She addresses a vivid image of subjugation that women’s position is like “bowed head” and “lowered eyes” in her own community and society. She presents women’s painful truth and how they endured their pain by many years. “Did you want to see me broken?” this line indicates how society wishes to see women broken into parts. Women’s suffering becomes the entertain thing to society.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker asks if their self-assured attitude bothers others. "Haughtiness" here symbolizes their bold confidence and refusal to be submissive or apologetic. The speaker compares their joy and self-worth to having immense, hidden wealth, like gold mines in their backyard. This means their happiness and value come from within, not from external validation or material possessions. With these lines “You may shoot me with your words/You may cut me with your eyes”, the speaker describes verbal and non-verbal forms of torture. They have the right and power to shoot, cut and kill women but they have no idea that women is like an air. They will rise after facing all obstacles and barriers. Society’s values and norms all are against women, they can shoot with their painful words or they will look at you as if you have done any wrong or they are able to kill women’s confidence, authenticity and strength. But women will still rise after all kind of torture.

Angelou uses her femininity by this line “Does my sexiness upset you” to challenge stereotypes about black women. They are not born to please men. They have their own identity and personality. “Does it come as a surprise” represents white’s and male dominated people’s

nervousness. The speaker challenges those who may feel uncomfortable or threatened by her pride in her physicality and sensuality. By likening her movements to the richness of diamonds, she emphasizes her self-worth, resilience, and empowerment despite societal judgment or oppression. If black women rise with their audacity, then it will surprise them because they did not expect such powerfulness of any black women. For the “dance” word she represents black women’s self-worth, empowerment, inner richness and reclaiming narratives around her body.

Angelou tells about their shameful history of slavery which is full of trauma. Reliving all the pain and sufferings women have experienced and walking up from those painful memories. Black Ocean is a powerful symbol. Black women are like black oceans who can bear welling, swelling but still they can back to their powerful “women form”.

In the last stanza, Angelou hope for a better future and liberty. By this line, “Leaving behind nights of terror and fear” she wants to leave all the fear, pain behind. Angelou speaks to overcoming a history of oppression, fear and injustice and emerging into a future full of promise and clarity. Daybreak symbolizes a new beginning, hopeful future. She connects herself to her ancestors who aspires for freedom and equality. The repetition of “I rise” signify their empowerment, self-consciousness and confidence at the same time.

Maya Angelou is also known as her poem “Phenomenal Woman”. In the history of western metaphysics 'woman' is phenomenal in a double sense. She's something wonderful, amazing, astonishing, peculiar. But she's also just a surface deviation; mere 'appearance'; unrepresentative of that distinctive, underlying 'essence' of humanity that philosophers have associated with 'truth'. She falls outside 'essence' - or the defining characteristics of a species or thing - in ways that have been supposed to make it a mistake to look for an essence of female nature or experience. (Battersby 1)

The poem is about women of color living alongside white people. Through her poetry, Maya Angelou hopes to convey to the reader the importance of valuing oneself despite not being praised for one's physical beauty and perfection. Black women have started to realize their rights as newly empowered women as political action has increased since the 1960s. Consequently, black women began to express their joy and suffering, annoyance and ambition, in their own unique ways. Because of the color of their skin, black women do not meet white ideals, according to white mindset. They are unique, just like women from other cultures. The

writer boldly claims that African American women have inner beauty, which is their distinctiveness, notwithstanding white women's questions about why they are lovely.

Maya Angelou is a poet who uses her poem to express her loneliness and isolation from her caged environment. She is the minority in her community because blacks are minority and whites considered as majority. Maya Angelou's work and her poetry is a reflection of past histories which is full of fragments. "Phenomenal Woman" published in 1978 in her collection "Touch me, life, not softly". It is a poem which tells about Black womanhood, rejects societal norms and proposes the real beauty of black women. Angelou illustrates in this poem that a woman's sexuality has nothing to do with having a beautiful face. It is about a woman's inner glow and her self-perception. The strength of women, identity, pride, self-acceptance, and self-love are all celebrated in this poetry. In addition to her physical appearance, the speaker is shown as a powerful, self-assured woman.

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. (Angelou, 130)

The speaker of the poem is not wonderful rather plain looking. She is not cute, not so beautiful who can be fixed in a model size suit. But she can talk about her wonderful physical attributes which can attract to any man. She can talk about her inner beauty and womanhood. The speaker is proud with her body structure. She is proud with her arms, hips, step, lips. She is not beautiful like whites but she is beautiful as her own way. She is proud as she is. She is confident with her beauty that is why she calls herself phenomenal woman.

Men are also amazed with her beauty and glow though she is not white but the way she presents herself make everyone shut. This line indicates "Then they swarm around me/A hive of honey bees" she walks with confidence that men surprise the way she walks, they fall down on their knees and swarm around her like honey bees. She presents herself boldly that man becomes honey bees. She can attract everyone with her inner strength and boldness. It is evident that the fire of speaker eyes symbolizes her boldness, strength, resilience and passion. It may be a fire of anger towards whites or also may be the sparkle of her eyes that comes out as fire. She presents her confidence and pride with her words like swing the waist, joy in her feet and flash

of her teeth. She is happy with herself and no one's opinion matters to her now. She is able to tackle her inner beauty.

Men can not understand women's inner struggle, emotions, elegance and beauty that is why "Men themselves have wondered/What they see in me". They only attract for physical appearance. That is why when they try to see they can not find anything extraordinary. But women's inner mystery in her inner essence which no one can touch or see. It is not possible to show one's inner potential, elegance, self-worth, individuality and uniqueness. Men fail to acknowledge women's inner beauty.

Through these lines- It's in the arch of my back/the sun of my smile/the ride of my breasts/the grace of my style, the speaker describes her secret of beauty which lies in her smile, breast and her style. She considered her style as "grace". The speaker represents her specific qualities of beauty and her elements of strength, empowerment. She shows her femininity that stayed in her style.

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. (Angelou 131)

The speaker is unique of all women because she has a bold black skin and she proud of her skin color. How she represented her skin color is the main point of the poem because it shows a black women's persistence, stubbornness and power. She is not ashamed with her beauty, so she is not even willing to bow her head. She is not willing to explain her beauty out loud, hence, her walk and movement give all the answers of her inner spirit.

In the last stanza, Angelou portrays her positivity towards beauty. She is not unconfident or embarrassed for herself, rather she is proud of her heels and hair. This poem shows a proud black woman who is empowered and confident. According to society's view, black complexion is not attractive but Angelou change the society's perception of women's beauty. Physical appearance is only matters to the Whites but Angelou shows one's inner glow and beauty.

“According to Charlotte Hill (2010), if the woman has the characteristics of fidelity and good deeds, her beauty will shine to the world around her.” (Sameer and Hadi Ali 605)

This poem reveals how a woman viewed in the world and tries to convey a message that inner beauty is the ultimate thing. A woman can not be judged by her physical appearance if she has no courage, spirit, strength and confidence. Women’s individuality is the main focus of this poem, as individuality can identify a person’s self-identity. When a black woman is able to show her individuality towards world then she will be recognized as phenomenal women, hence, real beauty lies on individuals’ identity. Through this identity a black woman can accept herself with her all flaws. It makes them more energetic and stronger minded. The speaker is not beautiful because she has not perfect fashionable model sized body so that they can attract men by their physical structure. Therefore, her confidence becomes her inner mystery that makes her a perfect phenomenal woman.

Maya Angelou’s works have the ability to evoke emotions and inspires readers. Through her poetry she explores identity, race, sexuality, gender and challenges societal prejudices that biases men or majority of the society. Her powerful words encourage every woman to find their voice and to understand their inner power. From childhood, she faces racial segregation and trauma. Angelou states in her autobiography-

“Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten?” (Angelou, “I know why the caged bird sings” 12)

She dreams to be a white girl who sees beautiful dream and whose hair is straighten. But Black Americans hair was blond and long which differs them from white girl. To be a white girl at the young age is the mental impact of white supremacy and black’s slavery. This line reveals the pathetic truth of living as a black girl in their community where whites are the majority. Angelou faced strong racism and gender inequality from her childhood periods. Angelou was denied from a white Dr. who does not want to treat her because she was black, in their community, it was forbidden to treat a black girl from a white doctor. “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” (King, “I have a dream”) Martin Luther King, Jr also talks about a racism free nation and community.

Despite all these, she tries to find her voice for her community and try to support them with her inspirational words and thoughts that individuals can find their self-identity with resilience. By reading her writing, one can overcome all the fear. She is able to portray a strong human experience through a powerful lens. She encourages readers, especially women about how to confronts own trauma, failure, success and to find the best way to move forward. Angelou's work reveals from her shameful past histories to her painful life experience. She gives her voice to the fearful women who still fears for society, prejudices and masculinity.

Angelou has the mentality, not to yield, becomes her strength whose work is to confront and fight back but never to surrender to anyone. She has the positive power to fight back and revel against white supremacy and society's masculinity. In an interview, Angelou reveals about herself that-

[.....] we may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. It may even be necessary to encounter the defeat, so that we can know who we are. So that we can see, oh, that happened, and I rose. I did get knocked down flat in front of the whole world, and I rose. I didn't run away – I rose right where I'd been knocked down. And then that's how you get to know yourself. (Angelou, "Conversation")

To discover thyself is the most difficult work in every individual's life but when they will be able to know and discover themselves, they will be live their life more authentically. Authenticity opens the door of self-acceptance. When a person accepts themselves then they will find their self-identity as well. Accepting thyself is the most crucial part of an individual's life because society's pressure can not lead an individual to know thyself, societal and cultural norms, prejudices, laws create a barrier and take them back from knowing thyself. Life is a war and we have to defeated society, only then we get to know ourselves.

Chapter-05

Findings and Discussion:

This research paper will explore the key findings of this study, these poems deal with identity, self-acceptance, traditional narratives, societal stereotypes and more. This study offers valuable insights into the complex theme of identity and self-expression. Through an analysis of Maya Angelou's personal journey to poetic journey, we gain a contextual understanding of identity and how it is addressed in the context of each poem.

The analysis of Angelou's first two poems “Caged Bird” and “Equality” reveals that women are being caged from their history. They have shackles in their legs and hands so that they can not move or raise their voice against societal expectations and cultural norms. Angelou confronts gender roles, marginalization, sexuality and racism placed on her. But she embraces her identity as a black woman writer who expresses herself through her writing. This symbolizes her assertion of independence and self-expression. In “Equality” Angelou highlights the equal justice as a woman in the society. On the other hand, the analysis of “Woman Work” reveals the hardships of every woman into a domestic wall. How patriarchy treats women is shown in the poem. Women’s duty is in a circle and notices their longing for escape and freedom. Women want to pursue their passion and ask for a break from their consequent work. It shows the brutal impact of patriarchal oppression.

In “Still I Rise” and “Phenomenal Woman” Angelou shows women's potential, resilience, desire to break all the obstacles and confidence. These two poems show how women can express themselves with the pressure of society. Society can not keep them down. If they want hard, they can be phenomenal women in the world of patriarchy and domination.

5.1. Conclusion:

As a black woman, Maya Angelou uses her feminist voice in her autobiography and poem to disclose the bitter truth and reality of the white dominant culture. She uses strong imagery and metaphor to proclaim women’s independent identity and challenges traditional dominant hegemonic culture of the whites. Women are being victimized and robbed under the male dominant culture which follows the mainstream of whites. Angelou addresses the miserable story of her community people and criticizes the world by using her feminist voice. In her

writing, she emphasizes ruthless treatment, powerlessness of black women and harmful stereotypes practiced from which every black woman goes. She depicts two cultures in her writing, as well as portrays black women as strong, independent, individual, elegant and confident. She presents the pathetic gender roles in her poems and new black women who have resilience and strength.

In conclusion, Maya Angelou attempted to break the social prejudices, stereotypes and social narratives towards black Subjugated women. By doing this, she indicates the real picture of their culture which women consider as a product or object. She uses her voice as a weapon and a way to get out of this hell.

By social Pressure every woman is losing their identity. Her voice works as a magic to bring those women out of the dark world by showing them the direction of light. This light refers to freedom. self-essence, uniqueness and resilience. In her childhood, Angelou's life was miserable because of her severe racial and traumatic experience. From poetry she gets her voice back and her voice works as a stimulus for those subjugated who suffer most. In her poems, she openly discloses her personal life experience and blend with her expressive words to display the reality of the patriarchal society.

Moreover, this study highlights equality and justice are two major words for black women who have no voice. Maya becomes their voice of strength. This paper shows the affirmation of self-worth and identity by embracing black womanhood. Her works illustrate how self-acceptance connects to social transformation and personal empowerment gives social justice and equality. She works the fosters as a medium of healing from trauma and reclamation of marginalized voices. Her wonks inspire others to bring their authentic self. Her writing encourages to view self-acceptance as a revolutionary tool and not to view it as only personal perception.

Thus, the recommendation to the future studies is to focus on the effect of identity crisis and how it is constructed. It could shed light on the perception of men's and women's identity crisis in marginalized communities.

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