

Portrayal Of Gender Inequality Through Selected Poems Of Maya Angelou

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the poems in The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou that are associated with the theme of “Gender Discrimination” and to examine how gender discrimination is portrayed in Maya Angelou’s selected poems. Gender discrimination refers to any unequal treatment based on gender. The data are taken from Maya Angelou’s selected poems, namely Caged Bird and Still I Rise. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method and applies expressive theory together with intrinsic and extrinsic approaches. The results show that gender discrimination is reflected in both selected poems. Caged Bird portrays a woman imprisoned by social stereotypes because of her gender. Still, I Rise presents a woman who faces gender-based prejudice but continues to rise. In conclusion, women face considerable gender discrimination; nevertheless, they do not give up and continue to rise with confidence.

Introduction

Literature is an art of writing that expresses feelings based on many aspects of life, such as culture, tradition, society, economics, politics, and language. There are three major genres of literature: poetry, prose, and drama. Each has its own distinctive qualities and is written in literary language. Among these genres, poetry has a special way of expressing the speaker’s intentions through imaginative language. Poetry represents the ideas and thoughts of poets and serves as a medium for expressing particular perceptions, feelings, and reflections. Furthermore, poetry is a literary form rich in imagination and emotional expression. It is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” [2]. Many studies have explored popular poems, with some focusing specifically on gender discrimination. One such study, Discrimination of

Female Leaders in Poetry and Novels: The Study of Feminism and Intertextuality, uses feminist theory and intertextuality to describe forms of discrimination against female leaders [3]. Other studies have explored gender discrimination in Maya Angelou [4] [5]. Related research has also examined The Way Black Women Face Racial Problems in Maya Angelou's Poems [6], supported by findings on The Types and the Roles of Feminism in Angelou's Selected Poems [7]. Maya Angelou is one of the most influential literary voices of modern times. She was a poet, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, actress, historian, filmmaker, and civil rights activist. In Stamps, Angelou not only experienced the brutality of racial discrimination but also encountered gender discrimination. Gender discrimination is any unequal treatment based on gender and may also be referred to as sexism [8]. Women have long had to confront sexism, while Black women in particular have had to face both sexism and racism. Angelou's words and actions continue to stir the soul, energize the body, liberate the mind, and heal the heart. She remains an inspirational figure, especially for women around the world.

Women are often perceived as weak, which makes them vulnerable to unfair treatment. Although women are born with the same human worth and dignity as men, over time and through social development they have often been positioned below men and treated with contempt. This has significantly affected women's lives and created various social problems [9]. Equal representation means that women and men should have roles of equal value and should receive equal treatment. The author applies *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* by Meyer Abrams. It presents four approaches to the interpretation of literature: objective theory, expressive theory, mimetic theory, and pragmatic theory. In this study, expressive theory is primarily used because it is relevant to the examination of gender discrimination in Maya Angelou's selected poems. In addition to expressive theory, the study also employs a descriptive qualitative method and intrinsic and extrinsic approaches to convey the message and interpret the poems [10]. This study is significant because it presents forms of discrimination through literary works, particularly poetry. Discrimination has long been a global issue across different regions, countries, and communities. Through Maya Angelou's selected poems,

poverty and women's limited access to legal protection are presented as factors contributing to a lack of protection and respect. Furthermore, the researcher analyzes the poems Caged Bird and Still I Rise, which portray gender discrimination. The objectives of the study are to identify which poems in The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou are associated with the theme of gender discrimination and to analyze how gender discrimination is portrayed in Maya Angelou's selected poems. Thus, the study focuses on two of Maya Angelou's poems: Caged Bird and Still I Rise.

Literature Review:

"Discrimination" derives from Latin, where the verb "discrimen" means "to separate, to distinguish, to make a distinction". In the early seventeenth century, the term discriminate appeared in the English language. The term "discrimination" later developed in American English to refer to prejudicial treatment of an individual based solely on race and was subsequently generalized to include membership in a socially disadvantaged group or social category. "Gender" typically refers to the behavioral, social, and psychological characteristics associated with men and women [11]. In addition, gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created within families, societies, and cultures. The concept of gender also includes expectations about the characteristics of women and men, including femininity and masculinity, and these socially constructed forms of subordination can be changed or eliminated. Women and men are fundamentally equal [12]. Gender discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of one gender by another, particularly the unequal treatment of women by men, based on the belief that one gender is superior to the other [13]. In other words, it uses physiological differences between men and women as a basis for assigning different social and economic positions [14]. Gender discrimination is any unequal treatment based on gender and may also be referred to as sexism. It is evident in situations in which a person shows prejudice toward another person because of sex or gender. Women and men are fundamentally equal: women possess the same mental abilities, talents, intellectual and physical strength, and capacity for logic and rational thought as men.

Literature is a body of written works. It may be classified according to a variety of systems, including language, national origin, historical period, genre, and subject matter. Literature includes forms such as novels, poems, plays, and poetry, each of which has distinctive characteristics expressed through literary language [15]. The word poetry derives from the Greek word poiein, meaning to make or construct. Poietis refers to the maker or the act of making, from which the concept of poetry as the art of the poet developed. Poetry is a literary form rich in imagination and the expression of feelings. In addition, poetry reflects the ideas and thoughts of poets and serves as a medium through which they express particular perceptions, feelings, and reflections. Poetry presents carefully considered feelings in highly structured language. It concentrates precisely on meaning and attitude rather than merely on emotion. A poem emphasizes symbols, imagery, figurative language, rhythm, and rhyme. A poem should also convey meaning and communicate the message intended by the author. Furthermore, a poem contains several elements, including sense, feeling, tone, and intention [16].

- a. Sense is the subject matter of the poem.
- b. Feeling is the attitude of the writer towards the subject matter.
- c. Tone is the attitude of the writer towards the reader or reality.
- d. Intention deals with the reason of the writer to create the poem.

The book *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* by Meyer Abrams presents four approaches to the interpretation of literature: objective theory, expressive theory, mimetic theory, and pragmatic theory [17]. One of these is expressive theory. Expressive theory views a literary work as the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Literature can therefore be understood as a process of imagination shaped by the author's feelings and mind. The primary source and subject matter of a poem are the attributes and activities of the poet's own mind. This theory explains that the artist becomes the central element in generating the artistic product and in establishing the criteria by which it is judged.

Method:

Descriptive qualitative research is the method applied in this study because it can adequately describe linguistic and social phenomena. Having a natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher as the principal instrument are important characteristics of qualitative research [18] [19]. The primary data for this study are drawn from Maya Angelou's selected poems, Caged Bird and Still I Rise, while books and biographies related to the topic are used as secondary sources.

Result And Discussion:

Maya Angelou is one of the greatest poets and a highly influential literary figure. From a young age, she produced many literary works concerning women and society. She experienced not only gender discrimination but also the racism that was widespread in America. Women have to deal with various social problems, and Angelou, as a Black woman, specifically confronted both gender discrimination and racism. Through her book The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou, she represents women as people who may lack experience, protection, and respect in society, while also showing that the voice of gender equality has risen across the world. Gender discrimination in Maya Angelou's poetry can be seen in two selected poems: Caged Bird and Still I Rise.

Gender Discrimination in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

"Cage Bird"

This poem contains two main images: the "bird" and the "cage". The bird is a metaphor for freedom, while the cage represents imprisonment. The poet associates the bird with freedom because a bird can fly wherever and whenever it wants. The poem is connected to Maya Angelou's painful past, including the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her mother's boyfriend. The cage symbolizes imprisonment or limitation. The poet uses the pronoun "his" for both the free bird and the caged bird, while the analysis interprets the contrast in terms of gender inequality. The first line gives us a picture of the free bird: "The free bird leaps" suggests freedom to do whatever he likes. In the next line, the poet uses "wind" and "floats downstream" as metaphors for white tradition. These images suggest a definite form of power and a gender hierarchy in which men are represented as superior to women.

“And dips his wings” suggests that the free bird can fly wherever he wants, while “in the orange sun rays” is interpreted as a symbol of the caged bird’s prison. Although the sun rays are orange, the color orange here is associated with prison uniforms in the U.S., suggesting that the free bird comes close to the narrow cage of the caged bird. Maya Angelou thus portrays the power held by men. The expression “and dares to claim the sky” suggests that men possess authority over public life and governance, while the woman remains confined within her cage.

The free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats down stream
till the current ends
and dips his wings
in the oranges unrays
and dares to claim the sky. (Lines1-7)

The second stanza starts with the word “but”, which signals a situation different from that of the first stanza. The caged bird represents a person who is suffering. She moves quietly so that she will not be seen by anyone else. The caged bird is confined and unable to move freely. This is connected to Angelou’s past experience of trauma resulting from the inappropriate act committed by her mother’s boyfriend. “His wings are clipped” and “his feet are tied” suggest that the owner of the caged bird has closed the door to the outside world. However, the caged bird has another way to resist: she sings about freedom even though nobody may listen to her.

But a bird that stalks (Line8)

His wings are clipped and his feet are tied
So, he opens his throat to sing. (Lines12-14)

The third stanza describes how women are afraid of oppression by men. They tremble and their voices shake, yet they maintain their faith and continue singing until the world hears their painful story. The “tune” symbolizes hope for achieving justice. The caged bird, representing the woman, continues to sing the song of freedom.

And his tune is heard (Line 19)

For the caged bird sings of freedom (Lines 21-22)

The fourth stanza suggests that men care more about wealth than about the struggles women have faced. “Breeze” and the “fat worms” symbolize hope and opportunity for the free bird, representing men. The speaker uses the auditory image of “the winds” to give the poem a continuous flow. “The sighing trees” is an example of personification and symbolizes suffering, suggesting that even nature feels sorrow for women. The final line of the stanza, “and he names the sky his own”, clearly suggests that the man possesses absolute authority to do as he wishes.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own. (Lines 23-26)

The women are portrayed as being in deep misery. They move among dreams that have died, and the line “his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream” conveys despair and suffering. The word “Shadow” represents a soul that screams loudly but cannot be heard. The following lines repeat images from the second stanza. Maya Angelou suggests that even though “his wings are clipped and his feet are tied”, women have not completely lost hope and continue to fight for their rights. This stanza therefore shows that women will never give up.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so, he opens his throat to sing (Lines 29-30)

The final stanza repeats the third stanza and emphasizes the caged bird’s deepest desire. The women dream of freedom and of living without the judgments and stereotypes imposed by society. Along with racism, gender discrimination has persisted for centuries. The caged bird, representing women, claims that women can do everything that the free bird, representing men, can do, including participating in the governance of the country. The message of the poem is that equality may be difficult to achieve, but as long as hope remains, change is possible. People may be restricted or held back, but no one can completely prevent them from expressing how they feel. Discrimination is a social illness that needs to be abolished. Although

equality between men and women may not yet be fully realized, the poet urges women to continue moving toward freedom. For women, the path to liberation lies in continuing to sing, having a voice, and standing up for their rights.

“Still, I Rise”

This poem is written by Maya Angelou for women who face discrimination during their lives. The background of the poem concerns the survival of Black people in America, and it continues to have a strong impact on women who are treated unfairly in social life. Through the poem, readers can sense the speaker’s determination to overcome gender discrimination as well as the personal obstacles she experienced. The message of the poem is clear and powerful. Angelou repeats the phrase “Still I rise” many times like a mantra, suggesting that she will continue to rise until she achieves what she wants. Maya Angelou uses “you” to refer to men and “I” to refer to women. The poem is written mainly in the first-person singular, although “I” can also represent “we”. Angelou uses a narrative form that enables her to speak about the difficulties and achievements of her life. In short, the poem presents a discussion between men and women in situations of oppression.

Throughout her lifetime, Angelou experienced such oppression. This poem portrays a strong person who speaks about determination to overcome prejudice and restrictive social paradigms. The poem is written in a straightforward manner to emphasize the speaker’s determination. Maya Angelou teaches readers to keep moving forward regardless of what life brings. The poem stresses pride and hope, encouraging readers not to allow anyone to bring them down and to continue rising.

In the first stanza, the speaker expresses anger about social inequality. The first line, “You may write me down in history”, directly addresses the oppressors and suggests that she has already overcome many difficulties. “Tro din dirt” refers to Black women. The line “But still, like dust, I’ll Rise” contains a simile in which “Dust” symbolizes the ability to rise again. The speaker suggests that she will continue to live her life bravely.

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 (Lines1-4)

The first two lines of this stanza begin with rhetorical questions. These questions are sarcastic and provocative. The word “sassiness” refers to boldness, while the phrase “beset with gloom” conveys trouble and depression. The next line challenges the oppressor through the metaphor “Cause I walk like I’ve got oil well”, suggesting that Maya Angelou values herself highly. “Oil wells pumping in my living room” does not refer to monetary wealth alone but symbolizes the inner spirit and confidence she possesses. “Pumping in my living room” suggests that this spirit continues to rise within her.

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you be set with gloom?

“Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells

Pumping in my living room. (Lines5-8)

The third stanza uses simile. The “moon” and “sun” are analogies to nature that suggest continuity and permanence. She will rise like the moon and the sun, just as the tides of the ocean continue to flow. The following lines show her desire to keep rising. The second repetition of “Still I Rise” emphasizes the speaker’s determination and confidence in overcoming hardship.

Just like moons and like suns

with the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still, I'll rise. (Lines9-12)

The fourth stanza also begins with the rhetorical question “Did you want to see me broken?” and uses the image “Bowed head and lowered eyes?”. The tone of the stanza is grim. The speaker describes women as being full of pain and suffering. The question expresses their emotional condition: they are hurt both physically and mentally. The oppressors want women not only to feel broken but also to bow their heads and lower their eyes. The speaker compares the way a person’s shoulders drop when confidence is lost with the way tears fall down the face when a person is upset or hurt.

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?
shoulders falling down like tear drops
weakened by my soulful cries. (Lines13-16)

The rhetorical question in the first line of the stanza below expresses the speaker's suffering, while the overall tone of the stanza is confident. She provokes the oppressors by asking, "Does my haughtiness offend you?" The speaker suggests that the oppressors should not feel distressed by her confidence. In the second stanza she compares her value to oil wells, and in this stanza she describes herself through the image of gold mines, which symbolize joy, confidence, and worth.

Does my haughtiness off end you?
Don't you take it awful hard
"Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Dig "in my own backyard. (Lines17-18)

Here, "You" refers to men and "me" refers to women. The speaker mentions "shoot, cut, and kill", expressions that evoke acts of torment and suggest that what men have done is as harmful as violence with a knife or gun. "The dust" from the first stanza and "air" in this stanza are important symbols of endurance through hardship. Like air, she will continue to rise. Even though history has been difficult, her spirit will always triumph, and discrimination cannot hold her back.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I'll rise. (Lines21-24)

The seventh stanza begins with a rhetorical question that sounds as though the speaker is asking whether "you" are jealous of her. The tone is provocative. The line "Does it come as a surprise" is not simply a question seeking an answer but a statement suggesting that the speaker's confidence surprises the oppressor. "That I dance like I've got diamonds" suggests a free spirit and the freedom to act independently. After using the images of oil wells and gold mines, Maya Angelou now uses diamonds to describe her value. Diamonds symbolize wealth and power. The final line of the stanza, "At the meeting of my thighs", is an image through which she expresses her sexuality as a woman.

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise

that I dance like I've got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs? Lines25-28)

The next stanza contains the repetition of “I rise”, showing that Angelou continues to resist the stereotypes of social life at that time. The tone of this stanza is prayerful. She states that the past may be full of shame and failure, but she will rise. “Up from a past that’s rooted in pain” refers to the sorrow of slavery and discrimination in the past, which cannot be changed; nevertheless, she refuses to give up. In line 33, Maya Angelou describes herself as a “Black Ocean”, leaping and wide, an image that can create a sense of fear and immense power. “Black ocean” symbolizes Maya Angelou herself and Black women more broadly. Maya uses the image of a “black ocean” to represent the fear, suffering, and strength associated with her experiences from the past to the present. The stanza closes with a statement in line 34 through which she expresses the pain of being discriminated against and the strength with which she has endured it.

Out of the huts of history’s shame I rise

Up from a past that’s rooted in pain I rise

I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,

welling and swelling I bear in the tide. (Lines29-34)

The final stanza describes her desire to leave behind the nightmare she has experienced over the years. She has a strong vision that the future will be better. She presents herself as a gift and as someone capable of changing destiny. She becomes an icon of hope who will help bring freedom to the oppressed. These lines show how deeply she desires freedom from discrimination. In the following lines, she repeatedly declares that she will rise, emphasizing her determination to live freely as a human being.

I rise

I rise

I rise. (Lines 41-43)

This poem has a positive spirit and a strong tone. Based on the analysis above, the subject matter of the poem can be understood as gender discrimination. Every line conveys how deeply the speaker desires freedom and fair treatment as a human being. Maya Angelou expresses her feelings line by line as though she is speaking directly to readers, allowing them to understand and respond to the poem emotionally. The poem encourages readers to recognize discrimination as a form of inhumanity. People need to understand that all forms of discrimination, including gender discrimination, racism, and bullying, are unjust. Human beings are all capable of discriminating against others. The poem carries a powerful message reflected in its title: one should continue to “rise” regardless of what happens in life and continue to maintain hope. Hope keeps people strong and alive.

CONCLUSION: -

Two of Maya Angelou’s selected poems are associated with the theme of gender discrimination: Caged Bird and Still I Rise. In these poems, women are portrayed as having strong personalities and their own ways of confronting gender discrimination. Overall, the two selected poems portray their speakers as strong, brave, and confident women who resist the injustice of gender discrimination. Each poem expresses the feelings of a courageous woman who dreams of changing society’s stereotypes about women. The speakers demonstrate several ways of surviving and resisting within society, but the most important qualities are confidence and gratitude, both as women and as human beings.

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