

# The Voice of African-American Women: Feminist Voice in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

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Being an African-American female poet, dramatist, novelist and critic, Maya Angelou made use of her poetry and literary writing as a means to direct her own feeling toward the racial secularism and injustice of the American society. In addition, she displayed the strength aspects of black women in resisting these stereotypes institutions and supporting their self-confidence and dignity. Thus, many critics and writers indicated that Angelou's poems concentrate on her own self-image and regarded her works as a reflection of the African-American womanhood. Therefore, this paper aims to examine Angelou's poems that apparently mirror the female voice and identity in *Woman Work*, *Phenomenal Woman*, *Still I Rise* and *Equality*. In each of these poems, the poet used a persona to speak out about the personal experience of the poet with racism and oppression against black women. The feminist theory was adopted to analyse the feminist voice in Angelou's selected poems. The findings indicated that specific facts and literary devices of Angelou's utilisation of feminist inefficacy and silence were effective to stand against the racial discrimination and state of marginalisation. Thus, this paper implies that the reader can recognise Angelou's effort in emerging her own voice to speak about certain strategies used by the black women to sustain their self-respect, self-consciousness and identity.

**Key words:** *Angelou, Feminism, feminist, poetry, voice.*

## Introduction

Maya Angelou's perception of the feminist voice in her poetry emerged since her inauguration literary career. She deplored the negatives aspects of the inequality, racial discrimination and oppression that she has faced in her childhood (Constantakis & Kelly, 2012: 161). In this respect, Angelou seemed to be influenced by the feminist theories that advocate the identity of women and reject the idea of the social norms concerning family and

marriage. These aspects are the cause behind the black women's suffering since the period of the Civil war until the present time. According to Angelou, black women are victimised and being treated inferiorly by the strict rules of patriarch society that eclipsed women from having a sense of humanity as men (Bloom, 2009: 52). She portrayed the stereotypes and racial segregation against the black woman who becomes a victim of the black and white culture interaction. Angelou's poems signify her criticism of certain social issues such as: exploitation of African-American women and the double traumas of the African-American women of being the descendant of slaves and the racial injustices in America.

Many writers and critic focus on Angelou's poetry but none of them speak frankly about how she made use of her feminist voice in poetry. In their article, "Stylistic Analysis of the Poem "Women Work" by Maya Angelou (2016), Abdul Bari Khan and Muhammed Yasir Khan discussed the duties of black women in the house and how they endured the severe treatment of their male partners. This work doesn't focus on how Angelou used her own voice to speak about the hardships of life that black women faced. In his thesis "Analysis of Feminism in Maya Angelou's selected poems", Dian Sembiring studied how Angelou used her poetry as a vehicle to speak about this struggle of black women and the sever treatment of men. In this work, Sembiring doesn't relate the personal experience of Angelou and how her childhood affected her style of writing. Her experience with rape was an inspiring source behind the use of her feminist voice in her poems. So there is a need to study the main events in the life of Angelou that inspired her to use her feminist voice in her poems. The next section will discuss personal life of Angelou and the main influences behind her usage of feminist voice.

### **Short Biography of the Poet**

Marguerite Johnson was born in St. Louis, Missouri 1928, and later she changed her name to Maya Angelou. Her parents Bailey and Vivian Baxter Johnson send Maya and her brother to live with their grandmother because of their parents' divorce (Constantakis & Kelly, 2012:160). Angelou was raped when she was only eight by her mother's boyfriend who was later killed by Angelou's uncles. Angelou detailed these horrified events in her six autobiographies and spoke frankly about her rape. She wrote essays, poetry and children's books. According to Harold Bloom (2009), Angelou wrote six autobiographies begin with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and the sixth one was published in 2002 (Bloom, 2009:53). Angelou's rape affected her to stay silent for five years. Later, she started to speak gradually when she completed the eight grade in 1940. Angelou learnt, when she was a kid, how to live as a black girl in a world that is controlled by the whites; she painted her hair to blond colour thinking that it will be better for her to live like a white girl. Angelou recorded her grief and the reality of being black by saying:

.....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?...Then they would understand why I had never picked up a southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother..... had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair. (Angelou, 1969:2)

At the age of sixteen, Angelou became pregnant and gave birth when she graduated from Missouri High School in San Francisco. Her dysfunctional childhood influenced her to handle the woes of African-American women especially those who were the victims of rape. So she became one of the most prominent black female activists. She has been criticised for the simplicity of her writing, but she replied to this by saying: "If that cannon, that body of literature written largely by white men, acknowledges my work, then well and good, I accept this honour" (Angelou, 1969:7).

Accordingly, Angelou's poems revealed her own voice that admitted her independence, perseverance and self-confidence. She is a female writer who was conscious about racism in America and her position in the midst of female black writers. The key factor in her writing was the feminine aspects. She blended the female voice in her poems to discuss several issues such as: to tell her own life to both black and white women in America, and to give a description of the unfairly treatment of women that herself experienced. The paper answers the questions that how did Angelou mixed her own voice in the target poems and how those poems reflected the feminist aspects of Maya Angelou.

## **Methodology**

This section discusses how the theory of Feminism affected Maya Angelou to employ the feminist aspects in her poetry to refute the portrayal of women as to be weak, obsequious and helpless. Angelou as a feminist writer, challenged the stereotype and racial segregation represented by the white hegemony and the capitalist system in America. Angelou attempted to change the perspectives of the readers especially men toward women who were being subjugated and shackled by the dominant world of male gender for a long time. Angelou's feminist revolution was being parked by the work of Betty Friedan (1963) *The Feminine Mystiques* that gave rise to another wave of feminism in the twentieth century (Constantakis & Kelly, 2012:165). The goal of this wave was to secure the rights of women in voting and to have equal rights with men. In this sense, Angelou described the miserable life of black women in America and presented the inequality in employment when many male workers marginalised and oppressed the identity of black women. For this reason, Angelou reflected the discrimination over black women in America through representing her voice to

introduce her aspect of womanist. This term was first used by black artist Alice Walker who differentiated between the experiences of black and white women in America. According to Jacquetta Amdahl (2005):

Womanist constructs black women's experience in opposition to those of white women. This meaning of womanism sees it as being different from and superior to feminism, a difference allegedly stemming from black white women's different histories with American racism (Amdahl, 2005:4).

Angelou attempted to invent new identity for black woman in terms of physical beauty that many white women regarded as one of the aspects of evaluating women's virtues. Angelou blended her influential voice in her poems correspondingly to sustain her powerful independent identity as a black woman. She is one of the most effective feminist writers who exhibited her consciousness and awareness toward the racial power of the American society (Lupton, 1998:72). Thus, one of the influential women who helped and supported Angelou to gain her own voice and became an important poet was Mrs. Flowers.

According to Mary Lupton (1998), Mrs. Flowers assisted Angelou to "read and regain her own voice, without her, Maya could never have become a writer" (Lupton, 1998:72). In one of her comments on her personality as a feminist writer, Angelou stated that "I am a feminist; I've been female for a long time now. I'd be stupid not to be on my own side" (qtd. in Adell, 1994:107). Angelou disclosed the ability to control her life as a feminist writer and dealt with the woes of black women even though if those women are regarded to be "limited" (Lupton, 1998:71). So, feminist's reading for the target poems could clear the picture behind Angelou's voice included in those poems. The next section thoroughly analyses some selected poems of Maya Angelou which are *Phenomenal Women*, *Work Woman*, *Still I Rise* and *Equality* that openly carry behind its words the voice of a feminist black poet. The next section discusses the analysis of Angelou's selected poems that openly revealed the usage of feminist aspect to criticize certain issues of the American society.

### **Maya Angelou: The Voice of Black Women**

The theory of feminism focused on the struggle and suffering of women who became the victims of the male dominant world. Those women did not rebel against these injustices but they wanted to be treated like human beings and have "intriguing elements" within themselves. Maya Angelou as an African American woman used her poems as a vehicle to study the woes of black women who are being oppressed and treated gravely due to the racial ideology of the white American society. The female characters in her poems are African American women who were puzzled whether to be assimilated to white hegemonic culture or to stay with their black culture. Those women were endangered and distorted by the new

values of white cultures that separated them by force from their own culture. In most of her poems, Angelou designated the impact of hegemony against African- American women through a female voice that is being threatened by intertwine between black and white cultures.

The first poem to be analysed here is *Phenomenal Woman* that was published in 1978 in Angelou's volume *And Still I Rise*. In this poem, Angelou comprises her own voice of black woman to speak about her beauty and powerful personality that appeal to men, despite the fact that she has not "certain qualities associated with traditional notions of beauty" (Constantakis& Kelly, 2012:159). Throughout this poem, Angelou encloses repetition at the end of each stanza that postulates the verification of her female voice as well as to designate that she is herself the phenomenal woman of the poem's title (Constantakis& Kelly, 2012:159). The four stanzas poem inaugurates with a description of the phenomenal woman who describes her physical body, her lips, walk and arms. Then the speaker pictures her beauty to be neither so attractive nor a "fashion model" who tells no lies to men about her beauty. The speaker of the poem states:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies,  
I'm not cute or built to suit on fashion model's size.  
But when I start to them,  
They think I'm telling lies.  
I say,  
It's in the reach of my arms,  
The span of my lips,  
The stride of my step,  
The curl of my lips,  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.  
(Angelou, 1994:130)

The word "secret" in these lines represents the feelings of self-confidence that the speaker has. In addition, the speaker enlists her elements of strength when she describes her arms, hips, step and lips (Bloom, 2001:44). In the second stanza, the speaker sustains to represent the beauty of her femininity that appealed to men and empowered her with specific qualities of beauty that she does not have in reality. Thus, the speaker advises other women to love her and have self-confidence in their personalities. Anyway, in this stanza, she designates the "fire in my eyes" that avows the uniqueness of her personality. However, the speaker refers to the flash of her teeth that expressed her pureness of spirit. She says:

I walk into a room  
Just as cool as you please,  
And to a man,  
The fellows stand or  
Fall down on their knees.  
Then they swarm around me,  
A hive of honey bees.  
(Angelou, 1994:130)

These lines showed the happiness and joy of the phenomenal woman who admitted her female identity through her position as a queen and through other men who "fall down on their knees" because of her elation and attractiveness. Continually, Angelou here used the personal pronoun 'I' that assured her identity as black woman and her femininity. She is like her predecessors Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar who used this personal pronoun to emphasise their black identity as poets. The speaker says:

I say,  
It's the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet,  
I'm a woman.  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.  
(Angelou, 1994:130-1)

As a woman, the speaker maintains the beauty of her eyes, her flash of teeth and her jaunty sway when she "saunters through the room" (Constantakis & Kelly, 2012:161). In the third stanza, the speaker declares that her inner mystery appealed to men and made them wonder what the secret behind the personality of this woman is. The speaker sates:

Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.  
They try so much  
But they can't touch  
My inner mystery.  
(Angelou, 1994:131).

Although this phenomenal woman attempts to show the secret behind her 'inner mystery', men fail to be familiar with or acknowledge this 'inner mystery' in her personality (Bloom, 2001:45). The next lines illustrated this secret by demonstrating some aspects of women's 'inner mystery' when she labelled her body and sexual movement. The speaker says:

When I try to show them,  
They say they still can't see,  
I say,  
It's in the arch of my back,  
The sum of my smile,  
The rise of my breast,  
The grace of my style,  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally,  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.  
(Angelou, 1994:131).

In relation, through these lines, the speaker makes it obvious that the secret behind the 'inner mystery' lies in her smile, the rise of her breast and the 'grace of her style'. These physical elements provide a share into her intriguing feeling and it is also a key factor behind being a 'phenomenal woman' (Constantakis, 2012:161). In the last stanza of the poem, the poet sustains to confirm this self-image that is full of kudos and laurels which assisted her not to 'bow' her head to men or feel with shame and indignity. This 'phenomenal woman' has a good individuality that made her feel with pride and superiority as she is passing and the spectators observed her beauty. The speaker:

Now you understand.  
Just why my heads 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, 1994:131)

The last lines of the poem enlists the points of strength in the personality of the 'phenomenal woman' and her physical beauty when she utters words like 'click my hearts', 'the bend of my hair' and 'the need of my care' (Angelou, 1994:131). These phrases demonstrate the warmth of her beauty and the inevitable charm that others need. The word 'click' specifies the sound of her shoes which divulges her 'saunter'. The speaker declares:

I say,  
It's in the click of my heels.  
The bend of my hair,  
The palm of my hand.  
The need for me are,  
cause, I'm a woman  
Phenomenally,  
Phenomena woman,  
That's me.  
(Angelou, 1994:131).

Through these lines, the speaker who represented Angelou proclaims her femininity as a woman and recommends other women to think about themselves and how they could be better than men who controlled them as toys. Those women according to the speaker of the poem have strength aspects of self-confidence, inner mystery and the good individuality that supported them to be phenomenal rather than men. 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. Hill says:

A woman's inner beauty needs to always be evident on the outside, integrity, honesty, morals and values are traits that make up her character. No matter what the situation or circumstances, a woman that possesses inner beauty will conduct herself in matter that makes others take notice. (Hill, 2010:4).

In such way, Angelou's style of writing poetry confirms her self-confidence and talent. This poem captures the feminist voice of Angelou through her description of "the physical appeal of woman and delivers corresponding litany of the endless cycle of chores in a woman's typical day" (Neubauer, 1990:137). Angelou advises black women to face the hardships of life and the modest circumstances of lifestyle so that they will be able to avoid the assimilation of the white dominant cultural aspect that regarded them to be ugly and dirty.

The other poem to be analysed here is *Woman Work* which was published in 1978. This poem proclaims the theme of feminism and self-identity. The female voice in this poem is that of Maya Angelou who recounts her daily life as any other black woman whose life is dedicated only for taking care of others (Constantakis, 2010:287). Thus, this poem conveyed Angelou's personal feelings toward the period that witnessed many important events like "the end of Vietnam" and the interesting momentum of the feminist movement" (Constantakis, 2010:288). All these events have influenced Angelou to compose this poem and employ her female voice to speak about the hardships of living in the South of America. The speaker of the poem starts with representing how the life of being a slave is very hard. She describes the

duties of a traditional woman who has to work all the day, clean the house, tends the children and to work for making living, etc. The speaker says:

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  
I've got the 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, 1994: 153)

Through these lines, Angelou displays that black woman's life is like that of a slave because most of her daily duties are done for the interest of others not for herself (Constantakis, 2010:290). She endures all these hardships and lives in a 'hut' made of wooden and needs to be cleaned regularly. The next stanza of the poem discloses the poet's invocation to the beauties of nature like the sunshine and rain drops that gives her strength and power. The poet says:

Shine on me, sunshine  
Rain on me, rain  
Fall softly, dew drops  
And cool my brow again.  
(Angelou, 1994: 153)

The typical structure of these lines and their shortness stand as dissimilar to the first long stanza and its reference of slavery. The female voice in this stanza represents the poet's hopes toward the world around her to save her from the miserable life that she lives in (Walker, 2017: 3). The poet supplicates the storm to take her to the sky away from her place in order to find tranquillity and peace. This idea designates the miserable situation of black woman in a society that is controlled by men. The speaker says:

Storm, blow me from here  
With your fiercest wind

Let me float across the sky  
Till I can rest again.  
(Angelou, 1994: 153)

Then the next stanza illustrates how the sturdy woman faces all the hardships of life and how she does not give up, but carries on her contest. She recognises that she has to rest and let the 'snowflakes' fresh and smooth her skin because the next days will be full of works. The poet says:

Fall gently, snowflakes  
Cover me with white  
Cold icy kisses and  
Let me rest tonight.  
(Angelou, 1994:153)

The last stanza of the poem exposes the poet's beseech to the elements of nature to find release and comfort from never-ending work. This hard-working woman devotes her life as slave only to serve others without dignity. The natural elements of the sky, sun, mountain and moonlight characterise the source of perseverance for this woman. The final line of the poem upholds the idea that this woman is a victim of slavery and exploitation (Constantakis, 2010:290). The speaker says:

Sun, rain, curving sky  
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone  
Star shine, moon glow  
You're all that I can call my own.  
(Angelou, 1994: 154)

The poet ends the poem with surroundings to nature when she reveals that her life is a drudgery and hard. This poem is like Angelou's other poems, which discloses the female voice of a woman who undergoes the sexual harassment, oppression and other forms of torture. Angelou exerted much effort to achieve the full equality and freedom for her, the societies around the world and for all black women who suffered bad treatment just like what Angelou experienced in her life.

Accordingly, Angelou's poem *Still I Rise* (1978), speaks to unnamed person who supposed to be Angelou's voice that speaks to black women and men. The poem consists of nine stanzas and starts with a female voice who displays her strength toward the difficulties of life. Through using the pronoun (I) that epitomizes a wider idea of a black collective (Bloom, 2001:50). The speaker says:

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, 1994:163)

The speaker addresses some persons through the pronoun "you" which may represent the white men who consider black community as a minority and oppressed them for centuries. In the next stanza, the speaker wonders and asks a rhetorical and bitter question by signifying her goal behind annoying men; by her "sassiness" because she has a self-confidence that aids her to keep moving despite their [men] injustice treatment for her (Bloom,2001:50). The speaker says:

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room,  
(Angelou, 1994:163)

With these lines, the speaker compares her moving to a person who has 'oil wells' that proclaims her forte and modesty toward other women. Then in the next stanza, the speaker compares her rise to the moon, and sun because these natural elements have the capacity of rising regularly. The images of moon and sun also designate the aspects of love and hope in the heart of the speaker who desires to modify her life for the better and the word 'tide' sustains this reference. The speaker says:

Just like moons and suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.  
(Angelou, 1994:163)

The speaker of the poem endeavours to disclose her confidence and self-esteem to men and makes them feel affronted because of her 'haughtiness'. She reiterates many questions with these two stanzas that point to her forte which will overcome oppression and sexism against black women (Angelou, 2013:4). In addition, the voice of the speaker here is the same of Angelou who suffered oppression and sexism that she could overcome by her strong will and poetry. The line "like I've got gold mines/digging in my own backyard" (Angelou, 1994:163), confirms her convenience and her rejection to the materialistic aspects of this world. The speaker says:

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?  
Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own backyard.  
(Angelou, 1994:163)

The speaker has the impression that she can be free from the controlled world of men and she expresses her freedom from this world by viewing her strong will that she has in her inner spirit. This confidence assists her to mock at men who become astounded and astonished because of her bravery and dignity. The next two stanzas emphasise these images of rising from a sad and shameful past to a brilliant and joyful life:

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.  
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?  
(Angelou, 1994: 163-4)

By reiterating these rhetorical questions, the speaker sustains her courageous attitude and her strength. The use of 'I' in these lines specifies a strong female who is a woman "forth right about the sexual nuances of personal and social struggle" (Stepito, 1979:315). This image of shameful past is being emphasized when the speaker says:

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.  
(Angelou, 1994:164)

The 'black ocean' here symbolises the race of the speaker as a black woman who celebrates her race and heritage, but she wishes to rise from terrible past that was full of horrible days of oppression and slavery. Angelou clarified that 'the black race will not just endure slavery but will triumph with a will of collective consciousness that western experience cannot extinguish' (Hager, 1997:129). The last line of the poem discloses the intension of the poet to celebrate the gifts of her ancestors regarding the past experience of her ancestors. The word 'gifts' suggests numerous meanings; it designates the past severe experience of the speaker's ancestors and it also infers the oppression act of slavery against black women in the past centuries up to the present time. She warns other black women not to be afraid or shameful because they are blacks and to free themselves from the dominant world of men. The speaker ends the poem:

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise  
(Angelou, 1994:164)

The speaker becomes the hope and dream for the oppressed women especially women in America. The speaker's voice in these lines proclaims its connection with Angelou's own voice that speaks to all black women. Angelou uses her own voice to encourage other black women not to care about the immoral treatment and to look at their ancestors past experience with racism.

Continually, the last poem to be analysed is *Equality*. The poem was published in 2001 which signifies and emphasises the theme of equality and freedom for all African- American women. In this poem, there is a communication between two races: white and black. The poem is spoken by a speaker who symbolises a female voice speaking to another person who is a representative of another group. The poet makes use of 'I' and 'you' to confirm this idea throughout the poem (Walker, 2015: 1). The speaker starts the poem by indicating the idea of being obscure through glass "that is shine" or a veil that prevents someone from observing his attitude, intentions and state. This veil could remind us with the veil that Du Bois designates in his philosophy of 'Double Consciousness' and that shapes the existing of veil which disguises the essence of the black culture. Angelou starts the poem by saying:

You declare you see me dimly  
Through a glass which will not shine  
Through I stand before you badly,  
Trim in rank and making time.  
(Angelou, 1994:232)

Along these lines, Angelou articulates her anxieties for freedom and liberation to lives as human and integrated woman. She comprises the female voice in this poem to disclose the state of grievance and in-equalization of womanhood in the United States (Emmott, 2017:85). Angelou's personal experience and black identity assist her to stand bravely against racism and emancipation of African-American woman. Her poems are blended by the perspectives of the pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance like Langston Hughes who is known as the poet Laureate of the renaissance and Paul Laurence Dunbar who is known as the great black poet of the Nineteenth century. She shares some of those poets' aspects. Among these aspects are the question for equality and freedom for black community. Undoubtedly, Angelou continues the poem by rendering specific and concrete images to suggest how the white people regarded the black woman as weak, filthy and uneducated. In the second stanza, Angelou infers the loud of her drums that make strong and loud sound to demand her freedom and equality. This sound resembles the sound of her heart that rises to repair the speaker's life. The speaker says:

You do own to hear me faintly  
As a whisper out of range,  
While my drums head out the message  
And the rhythms never change.  
(Angelou, 1994: 232)

The next lines of the second stanza give a powerful instance of the freedom and freeness. The speaker desires to be free and equal to the rest of the society. The speaker illustrates these two lines throughout the poem to sustain the freedom and equality for black women. The speaker also uses these lines to make "a separation between two similar structured verses" (Walker, 2015: 6), to make an additional contextual sense to the poem. The speaker says:

Equality; and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free.  
(Angelou, 1994:232)

Obviously, the poem continues its structure and remarkable style when the speaker re-counts the false charge that she was accused with as being a prostitute, immoral and indecorous. The speaker says:

You announce my ways are wanton,  
that I fly from man to man,  
but if I'm just a shadow to you,  
could you ever understand ?  
(Angelou, 1994:232)

Specifically, the word 'wanton' in this stanza represents the aggressive treatment against the black women. The expression "from man to man" symbolises the state of being raped by more than one man. In addition, there is another accusation for the speaker who assumes to do wrong things (Walker, 2015:7). The speaker employs a powerful language to ask a rhetorical question when she says "if I'm just a shadow to you" (Angelou, 1994:232), besides the use of 'I' and 'you', all these elements embody the metaphorical distance between the two persons. In the next stanza, the narrator simplifies the discrimination and oppression that she and other black women had endured. The use of 'we', 'painful history' and 'shameful past' signify the vision that the speaker is a member of persecuted and hated people who are longing for their equality and freedom (Gerbe, 2004:15). The speaker proclaims:

We have lived a painful history,  
we know the shameful past,  
but I keep on marching forward,  
and you keep on coming last.  
Equality, and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free.  
(Angelou, 1994: 232)

Through these lines, Angelou makes use of the female voice to demand her right as black woman and to talk in the name of other black women against the inequality and racism they had tolerated. The reiterated two lines confirm the theme of equality and freedom that become a myth like the American dream that many Americans wanted. This notion affirms the need for a revolution against racism. In this respect, the American society must not stay silent toward the injustice and inequality against black women (Walker, 2015:14). The next stanza divulges the outrage of the speaker toward the whites who become wilfully blinded toward the unfairness in the American society. Consequently, the speaker speaks about the 'blinder and padding' who do not acknowledge the truth of their wrongdoing and how they had oppressed black people for centuries. The speaker confesses that those individuals observed her pains and tears but they ignore her (Walker, 2015:14). The speaker says:

Take the blinders from your vision,  
take the padding from your ears,  
and confess you've heard me crying,

and admit you've seen my tears.  
(Angelou, 1994: 232)

The last stanza of the poem displays the speaker's impulse to the writers to listen to her verse that has never changed and removed the 'padding' from their ears, which in turn, prohibited them from listening to his verse. The heartbeat sound of the speaker is similar to the noise of the drum sound which specifies the powerlessness state of black women who are obliged to listen silently without expressing their opinions:

Hear the tempo so compelling,  
hear the blood throb in my veins.  
Yes, my drums are beating nightly,  
and the rhythms never change.  
Equality, and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free.  
(Angelou, 1994: 233)

The speaker reiterated the two lines again to specify her strength despite the vulnerability and depressed state, but she will not give up her fight. Through this poem, Angelou specifies her quest to be free and equal to the whites through her avowal that she will be free and equal to the rest of America.

## Conclusion

Maya Angelou is an African- American feminist who exhibited the problems of African-American women in her works, especially her autobiography and poems. She makes use of feminist voice in poems that plainly disclose her association with what she has done as a black feminist poet. Her style of writing states the feminist aspect that she longs to proclaim in her poems. As she was the victim of male dominant culture, her identity and civil right as a woman were eclipsed and robbed. She skilfully manifested the status of African-American woman under the white dominant culture. Angelou divulges through her poems how African-American women have been deprived from being fully accepted as human beings by the mainstream of American culture. Angelou and other African-American women are in-between characters of dominant culture of male world. Angelou included her own voice in most of her poems to re-count the miserable story of black woman in the world of the whites. Angelou criticized this world by using feminist voice in her poems through figurative language which emphasised the powerlessness of black women who experienced severe mental conflicts because of the dominant hegemonic culture of the whites. In the same vein, Angelou's poems '*Phenomenal Woman*', '*Work Woman*' and '*Equality*' depict the ruthless treatment and harmful stereotypes practiced against black women through the interaction of



the two cultures: black and white. Yet, Angelou portrays black women to be strong and confident through their resistance to slender. She challenges the traditional perspectives that present the female gender as pathetic and passive to give a new outlook that black women are resilient and competent.

Maya Angelou as a black activist, attempted to change the perspectives of the readers especially men toward women who were being subjugated by the dominant world of male gender for a long time. By doing so, Angelou has given readers a new impression about black women who can challenge the cultural norms that make women an object. Angelou connects the feminist voice in her poems the vital role of women in society and contrasted it with the idea of being independent. This study was conducted to study the feminist voice of Angelou in her poems: '*Phenomenal Woman*', '*Work Woman*' and '*Equality*'. In this respect, those poems openly display the severe experience of Angelou with rape and racism. Her poems displayed the miserable situations in which she was lived.

The contribution of this paper is to enrich the future studies with facts about the reality of the American society and how mythical dream the American Dream in achieving equal rights in American. The recommendation to the future studies is to focus on the effect of the latter events in America on the literary style of Maya Angelou and how she defeated racism through poetry.



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