

The Will to Overcome

A Critical Analysis on Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise*

By Kamryn Gaskin

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide  
Welling and swelling I bear with the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wonderfully clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise

This is the last stanza of the well known poem *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou. After facing a traumatizing incident of sexual abuse at a very young age, and witnessing the brutality of racial discrimination, Maya Angelou overcame challenges throughout her life that so many people could relate to, myself included. Everyone, at some point in their lives, face challenges and hardships in which they must find a way to overcome. Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise*, a dynamic and empowering poem about the struggle to overcome prejudice, injustice and oppression, utilizes powerful metaphors, vivid language and an impactful message to convey a compelling story regarding the black experience in America. First, I will discuss the personal implication that this poem's message had on my life. Next, I will identify the context in which the poem came about. Then I will mention the methods used to analyze *Still I Rise*. In addition, I will provide some analysis relating to my artifact. Lastly, I will conclude with some holistic concepts of my findings.

I've personally experienced discrimination, from a mental health point of view, my sophomore year of college. When I look at my reflection in the mirror today, I see a young,

resilient Black woman, but that wasn't what I always saw. There was a time when I was afraid of my own reflection, due to my circumstances. It was as if I lost my sense of identity. During the Spring of 2018, I was admitted, for lengthy stays, three times into hospitals that I never would have thought to end up in. My mental, emotional and physical state was far from its healthy "social-butterfly" personality. People assumed that I was a drug addict because of the medication that I was on, when in all actuality, I was drug naive. The doctors were just trying to solve the mystery. I had extreme depression and significant anxiety, thus fitting the bias profile of a drug addict. I was judged so quickly for having a drug-induced mental illness, when the condition was an underlying medical diagnosis.

During this period of mental instability, I kept telling myself that the people who I thought were trying to figure out my diagnosis, such as various doctors and some family members, were mad at me for something I didn't even do. This psychological state prevented me from seeing my friends. I isolated myself and avoided my phone, television and computer. To this day, I still have vivid flashbacks of my emotional and physical trauma, but I refuse to let my past experiences impact my present emotional state, or negatively impact the success of my future endeavors. Once I came home to New Jersey, I was treated at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, in Philadelphia, where there were two amazing doctors: Doctor Higdon and Doctor Abbasi. They never stereotyped me into a box, or labeled my circumstance with some disease, and treated the situation with a concoction of pills. Instead, they fought to rule out important questions without showing any bias. It wasn't about me being a patient; it was about me being well. It's evident that the healthcare industry is heavily shunned, socially, politically and economically, but what people tend not to talk about is, why society has become this way. I

believe that health disparities are the outcome of racial, class, and religious tensions in America. Maya Angelou was a trailblazer that tapped into these tensions, for her message was relatable to so many, including myself.

### **Context**

Maya Angelou, originally named Marguerite Annie Johnson, was born on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. At age three, her parents divorced and her and her brother were sent to live with their paternal grandmother, whom she referred to as Momma. Momma was a significant force in Angelou's early life. Momma believed it was important for Marguerite and Bailey, Marguerite's brother, to attend church regularly. Religion and gospel music were important factors in their lives at a very young age. She deemed it necessary to create a strong spiritual foundation for the children. Bailey and Marguerite became very close. He even gave her the name Maya.

Maya Angelou went mute for five years following her rape by her mother's boyfriend at age seven. She believed that she caused the man's death because she spoke his name. With the encouragement of Mrs. Flowers, an educated black woman and mother-figure to Maya, she regained her voice. Mrs. Flower's continued guidance led to an immense amount of reading. Maya read the works of William Shakespeare, Edgar Allen Poe, Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. In this season of her life, she also learned how to write poetry (Williamson n.p). This was love at first sight for Maya Angelou. This is where her legacy began.

*Still I Rise*, to this day, is still one of Maya Angelou's most acknowledged poems. Published in 1978 and written during a highly prolific time during her life, *Still I Rise* shares the title with a play she wrote in 1976. By the time the poem was published, Maya had already

received recognition for three autobiographies in addition to her two volumes of poetry. *Still I Rise* was a personal favorite of Maya's, and she expressed that when she would recite it, often times, at public readings (Still I Rise Study Guide). Maya often turns to this poem in times of hardship and despair, for it gives her hope and helps her rise above the occasion.

### Method

In a research paper titled *Feminism and Social Disparity in the Poems of Maya Angelou and Meena Kandas*, the thesis aims at drawing similarities and differences between the works of Maya and Meena, with the themes of feminism and social disparity at the core. The essay suggests that "For the Black, Asian and women of colour, the feminist issue is also a race issue. Feminists alert to the ethnocentricity which informs feminist work. Racism haunts sexism and their inter-relations should not be ignored. Black feminists argue that race, class, and gender are interlocking systems of oppression and not additive systems". Maya Angelou is well known for expressing her intersectionality through the use of intertwining race, gender and sexuality in one body of work. I believe that it's imperative to understand that Maya Angelou's narrative is very much so relatable to the common black girl. While everybody deals with their own personal traumas and hardships, *Still I Rise* ties women together in the same sense that this essay tied together Angelou's story and Kandas' story.

It's one thing to know Maya Angelou's story, but it's another thing to remember and share her story. Even though the world lost a mother and a friend, Maya's spirit continues to live on forever. In an ESSENCE tribute, eleven luminaries and literary figures discuss how Maya has inspired and impacted their lives. Marcia Ann Gillespie, former editor in chief of ESSENCE magazine, discusses her forty-year friendship with Maya. Marcia talks about the time when

Maya invited her to lunch and how tongue-tied she was to be amongst such a shero. She emphasizes how Maya proved wrong all of the people who had discounted and underlooked black women writers. Marcia concludes her thoughts by signifying that “Somewhere in the nooks and corners of the globe, someone is reading one of her books, reciting one of her poems, listening to her rich, mellifluous voice as she offers guidance, solace or affirmation. Her words continue to inspire and inform, challenge and change us. She constantly affirms us: Us women, us Black women, us human beings” (Gillespie n.p). This passage is imperative because it not only displays the impact in which Maya has made on the world but also shows how her work transcends from generation to generation.

A critical analysis discusses the writer’s opinion or the evaluation of an artifact. An analysis breaks down or dissects an artifact so that the writer can study its parts. It’s important to critique an artifact in a well-constructed, reasoned and clear manner. In an article titled *Some were wild, some were soft, some were tame, and some were fiery”: Female Dancers, Male Explorers, and the Sexualization of Blackness, 1600-1900*, the writer critically analyzes how the discourse and imagery of West African female dancers correlates with notions of power, desire disgust and superiority in Western narratives from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. This article also critically “examines how the white male gaze sexualized African dance, contributed to the construction of race and gender, and affected the experiences of black women in the Atlantic world” (Thompson 1). The ideologies that I chose to define include feminism, racism and individualism. According to an article from Conscious Magazine, feminism is defined as, not only an “equality of the sexes” but also “a mutual respect”. If someone believes that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an

inherent superiority of a particular race, that person is considered racist. And lastly, individualism holds the conception that all values, rights, and duties originate in individuals. All three ideologies work together to achieve Maya Angelou's message of keeping hope alive in the black experience.

A narrative analysis deals with interpreted research of stories that are shared in everyday life. There are several elements to a successful narrative analysis. Some include, but are not limited to, how the story is structured, how the functions of the story are served, what is the substance of the story and how it is performed or carried out. In a *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, an essay titled *Making Sense of Stories: A Narrative Approach to Narrative Analysis*, the researchers state, "Narratives are useful data because individuals often make sense of the world and their place in it through narrative form. Through telling their stories, people distill and reflect a particular understanding of social and political relations. Stories are common, habitual method people use to communicate their ideas" (Feldman 148). The journal also states that "narrative form can be loosely defined as a sequence of events, experiences, or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole (Czarniawska 1998; Franzosi 1998)" (Feldman 148). These passages are significant because through looking at the form, structure and content of a narrative, one can conclude a lot about the narrator's purpose behind the story. Every author has a different purpose for each and every story they publish. Some may be to inform, others may be to persuade, but it all boils down to conveying a believable message to the audience. Angelou not only conveys a message, but she also tells a narrative that is relatable and noteworthy.

### Analysis

By analyzing Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise* poem, one is able to perceive the different ideologies or "isms", in addition to the narrative that the poem tells. Through the use of critical and narrative analysis, one can analyze Angelou's masterpiece of a text to emphasize oppression through a black woman's lens. It is vital to see how perspective plays a role in this poem and how it is carried out throughout each stanza. Angelou does a masterful job of not only informing the audience of the history of Black people's evolution, but she also encourages her audience to make an effort to do something about the current challenges that Blacks face today.

Maya Angelou advocated for women, especially after she was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend at a young age. Throughout the poem, Angelou aims to make her womanhood and femininity known, to say the least. She uses hyperboles to add a kind of absurd beauty to the poem. Her feminist ideology is expressed when she states, "Does my sexiness upset you?/ Does it come as some surprise?/ That I dance like I've got diamonds/ At the meeting of my thighs?" She chuckles in between lines and sways her body to lighten up the mood and give the poem some movement. Maya Angelou is simply expressing that she knows her self-worth, she knows that she is worthy of being respected as a woman, and that she is well deserving of equal rights. The feminism that Angelou expresses to her audience persuades them to support the concept of equal rights for women.

Growing up in Stamps, Arkansas, living and witnessing the injustices of black people, Maya Angelou discusses racism in several of her poems, *Still I Rise* being one of her works that illustrates the narrative of how the black experience has changed over time. The fourth stanza of the poem states, "Do you want to see me broken?/ Bowed head and lowered eyes?/ Shoulders



falling down like teardrops./ Weakened by my soulful cries”. When Angelou says these lines, she says it with inflection and charisma. In a sense, Angelou acts out the words as she says them for she is calling out the oppressors for their wrongdoings. She is basically saying that society would like to see her weak and broken because of the struggles she has faced. The rhetorical questions that she states emphasizes her sense of pride. Also, the sixth stanza brings the oppressive issue to a climax when the three lines begin with 'You', Maya Angelou choosing particularly active verbs - *shoot, cut, kill* - to emphasize the aggression and discrimination. The oppressed will still rise, this time like air, an element which you can not shoot, cut or kill. Through the theme of racism, Angelou encourages her audience to remember those who sacrificed their lives during the dark past of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, but most importantly, to be a catalyst of change for freedom.

Individualism is a major theme that enhances the narrative of black people’s evolution throughout *Still I Rise*. Maya Angelou has always stood out from the rest of the crowd in her approach to orating her poems. Angelou stands out from other poets because she is not afraid to be bold and daring. She has always been enthused to speak on the individual rights of minority people, and black women in particular. Not only does Maya Angelou speak up for herself, but she also speaks for other living blacks and even her black ancestors. She acts as one voice speaking on behalf of countless others. The third stanza of her poem states, “Just like moons and like suns,/ With the certainty of tides,/ Just like hopes springing high,/ Still I’ll rise”. This stanza highlights the comparison of certainty of nature with her determination and resilience to rise above challenges. Maya Angelou has proven to herself and her oppressors, time and time again,

how resilient she truly can be. This poem acts as a lesson for all individuals to stand up for your rights and be an advocate of positive change in the world.

There is a common narrative displayed throughout the poem. This narrative could be described as the evolution of black people's oppression. In some sections of the poem, Angelou addresses the struggles of black women, in particular. By giving her audience the encouragement to rise above any circumstance in life, Angelou powerfully and metaphorically emphasizes how black people will continue to overcome their battles. This poem is more than just a poem. It's a call to action. It's a reminder to let minorities know that the odds are stacked up against them. Angelou discusses the ways in which black history is recorded when she states "You may write me down in history/ With your bitter, twisted lies/ You may tread me in the very dirt/ But still, like dust, I rise". These lines of the poem are significant because she is highlighting the fact that black history gets misconstrued and wrongly recorded over time. This is an issue because there are concepts that are taught to children that are hazy and ambiguous. This causes conflict later on in a child's life because they become accustomed to what they've grown to know instead of being taught the truth from the beginning.

For instance, in history class, students typically learn about slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, only during the month of February. They are taught the lives of the more commonly celebrated historical black figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Rosa Parks. Personally, it wasn't until college where I had to do the research for myself, to dig deeper into the oppression that my culture has dealt with for centuries. I've realized that my colleagues experienced the same scenario. Especially as a student who attends the University of Alabama, where there's so much enriching history, it is likely to find oneself brushing the surface of

knowledge, instead of digging deeper into the depths of understanding. *Still I Rise*, is the epitome of being intentional with the profundity of one's history. Not only does Angelou highlight the fact that there are lies that have been written down in history, regarding the black experience, but she also has lived through the struggles that she writes about.

Everybody faces the burdens of overcoming challenges. During the trial of meeting your hardship, face to face, it seems impossible to defeat it. The feeling of relief when you overcome a rough time in life is immensely liberating. Maya Angelou encountered several hardships, yet she was still merciful and showed grace through her stormy days. I encourage everyone to be more like Maya. It is easier to hate and judge others than to smile and show love and open-heartedness. Go the extra mile to reach out and touch somebody's hand. Make someone's day a little less of a burden by sharing laughter with them. Be kind to one another. Life is too short to be bitter and spiteful. Even Maya Angelou states "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel".

### **Conclusion**

*Still I Rise* acts as an anthem or a beacon of hope for the oppressed. It reminds us of the abuse of power in the judiciary, the police force and the government. It offers an intriguing combination of tones: playful and defiant, comical and angry, and self-assured and bitter. The theme of hope signifies that there is a light at the end of the dark tunnel. The repetition of the phrase, "Still I Rise" as well as the final line "I am the dream and the hope of the slave" clarifies the message of yearning for a hopeful future. Hope will always be there to cling on to, no matter the circumstances. Written with slavery and civil rights issues in mind, *Still I Rise* is still

universal in its appeal. Any innocent individual, minority, or nation subject to oppression or abuse could understand the underlying theme of hope - don't give into torture, bullying, humiliation and injustice. America was built by the blood, sweat and tears of black people, yet the cycle of systemic racism teaches minorities to stay trapped within their boundaries. I say, break through the negative cycle. Break down the walls of oppression. Break out of the chains of bondage and into the light of freedom.

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