



{ MUDIMA }



## Women Representation through Selected Poems of Maya Angelou

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### ABSTRACT

The paper aimed to study the representations of women in the selected poems of Maya Angelou. The researchers utilized qualitative textual analysis and close reading methods in analyzing the poems through feminism. The results of the researchers' analysis of the selected poems of Maya Angelou emphasized the representation of women per poem: a slave, an outcast, and a mother. The findings of this study encompassed the importance of utilizing feminist approach in analyzing poems to appreciate and empower women against societal expectations and personal challenges in different complexities of life. The researchers suggest exploring more literature from the perspective of feminism to provide further information about other representations of women

## **INTRODUCTION**

Yoder (1983) asserts that feminist literary criticism does not refer to criticism of women writers, women critics, or women's critique. However, it basically implies that readers should critique a work of literature and be particularly conscious of the ways in which sex is related to society, literature, and our lives in general. As a result, they differ from one another in terms of authors, readers, characters, and other elements that affect writing activities. Culler (1983) asserted that reading as women is one of the broadly defined parameters of feminist literary critique. This meant that readers should be aware of the significant ways that persons of different sexes view the same literary work. Tuttle, Lisa (1986) identifies the ultimate objectives of feminist criticism as "developing and uncovering a female tradition of writing," "analyzing women writers and their writings from a female perspective," "rediscovering old texts," "interpreting the symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view," "resisting sexism in literature," and "raising awareness of the sexual politics of language and style." Stated differently, feminist literary criticism is a subset of literary criticism that is grounded on feminist theory, or more specifically, the politics of feminism.

The aim of this research is to examine the suggested images of women in selected poems from Maya Angelou using the feminist literary approach. With that, the researchers aimed to analyze "Woman Work," "Momma Welfare Roll," and "Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me" to investigate how women were represented throughout these texts.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The researchers used qualitative textual analysis to execute this study. The phrase "textual analysis" refers to a wide range of study techniques used to characterize, decipher, and comprehend

texts. A text can provide a variety of information, including its literal meaning as well as its subtext, symbols, assumptions, and ideals (Caulfield, 2023). This design was used to make sure that the feminist perspective, which identifies how women are represented in poetry, is applied to the chosen poems of Maya Angelou. This research had no participants because it just required the analyzing skills of the researchers to examine the selected poems of Maya Angelou through a feminist approach.

### **Instruments**

The researchers utilized a To get the finest analysis findings, use a close reading strategy and thematic analysis. One technique for examining qualitative data is thematic analysis. Typically, it is used on various materials, such transcripts or interviews. In order to find recurring themes—topics, concepts, and meaning patterns—the researcher carefully scrutinizes the data (Caulfield, 2023). Close reading, on the other hand, is a thorough, in-depth examination of the structure of a literary work. It is described as a reading process that directs readers in an article from The Writing Center (n.d.) to include something from the text, which is the textual evidence, into a literary analysis paper through a refined form. These approaches were chosen to establish an in-depth analysis of the selected poems of Maya Angelou through the views of feminism. Lastly, the researchers limited the number of textual evidence to at most five (5), which best described each representation of women in each poem.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the data analysis using close reading of Maya Angelou's "Woman Work," "Momma Welfare Roll," and "Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me," the researchers have identified three representations of women: women as slaves, women as outcasts, and women as mothers.

Table 1. Textual Evidence on ‘Women as Slaves’

<b>Women as Slaves</b>		
<b>Woman Work</b>	<b>Momma Welfare Roll</b>	<b>Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me</b>
<p>“The can to be cut I gotta clean up this hut Then see about the sick And the cotton to pick.” <i>(Stanza 1, Lines 11-14)</i></p>	<p>No textual evidence found.</p>	

The first representation from the selected poems is women as slaves, which is solely found in the poem “Woman Work.” The lines 11–14 represent the speaker's tasks becoming increasingly laborious. These lines exhibit that women still have limited options, and are still resorting to work and are enslaved to provide for or take care of their families. According to Simsovic (2023) until the

mid-nineteenth century many African American women were enslaved as domestic laborers, working in the homes of their white enslavers to raise children, cook, launder, clothing, and clean furnishings (among other tasks). This serves as a powerful reminder of the challenges women have and continue to face, emphasizing the need for continued efforts toward equality and justice.

Table 2. Textual Evidence on ‘Women as Outcasts’

<b>Women as Outcasts</b>		
<b>Woman Work</b>	<b>Momma Welfare Roll</b>	<b>Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me</b>
<p>No textual evidence found.</p>	<p>“Her arms semaphore fat triangles, Pudgy hands bunched on layered hips Where bones idle under years of fatback” <i>(Stanza 1, Lines 1-3)</i></p> <p>“Her jowls shiver in accusation Of crimes clichéd by Repetition...” <i>(Stanza 1, Lines 5-7)</i></p>	<p>“Discard me like a broken doll Which had lost its favor.” <i>(Stanza 6, Lines 77-78)</i></p>
	<p>“Too fat to whore, Too mad to work, Searches her dreams for the Lucky sign and walks bare-handed Into a den of bureaucrats for Her portion” <i>(Stanza 2, Lines 12-17)</i></p>	

The next representation is women as outcasts, which is found in the poems "Momma Welfare Roll" and "A Cradle to Hold Me, Mother." The poem's heroine was subjected to discrimination due to her physical appearance, as stated in lines 1-4 of the first stanza of "Momma Welfare Roll." Lines 5-7 then followed, emphasizing that she is living in a society that judges her and that she encounters prejudices. The lady in the last stanza is shown to be struggling due to her looks and financial situation (Stanza 2, Lines 12-17), which mirrors the unjust treatment that women frequently experience in society, making it challenging for them to obtain help or work. According to Ghorfati and Medini (2015), women used to have no rights at all. The poem's subject suffered from loneliness, neglect, and abuse by others in such a way that her poverty makes no one want to accept her. Because of these

unjust circumstances, the poem suggests that women are mostly isolated due to their physical appearance and status.

Meanwhile, for "Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me," the lines 77-78 emphasized the speaker's fear of abandonment by her mother. In their 2015 dissertation, Ghorfati and Medini also looked at women's aspirations, aspirations, and capacity to transform their role in society from that of a daughter, wife, or mother to that of ordinary citizens with regular rights and responsibilities. The lady also hopes that one day she will be regarded like everyone else and have rights as a mother, a woman, and a citizen. This may also be a reflection of the concern that women would be disregarded by society because of prejudice against them, which might be seen as a quality of an outcast.

Figure 3. Textual Evidence on ‘Women as Mothers’

Women as Mothers		
Woman Work	Momma Welfare Roll	Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me
<p>“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” <i>(Stanza 1, Lines 1-10)</i></p>	<p>“...Her children, strangers To childhood's toys, play Best the games of darkened doorways, Rooftop tag, and know the slick feel of Other people's property.” <i>(Stanza 1, Lines 7-11)</i></p>	<p>“It is true I was created in you. It is also true That you were created for me.” <i>(Stanza 1, Lines 1-4)</i></p> <p>“Your arms were molded Into a cradle to hold me, to rock me.” <i>(Stanza 1, Lines 7-8)</i></p> <p>“The way you posed your head So that the light could caress your face When you put your fingers on my hand And your hand on my arm, I was blessed with a sense of health, Of strength and very good fortune.” <i>(Stanza 3, Lines 48-53)</i></p> <p>“I grew older and Was stunned to find How much knowledge you had gleaned. And so quickly.” <i>(Stanza 5, Lines 66-69)</i></p> <p>“You still find something in me To cherish, to admire and to love.” <i>(Stanza 6, Lines 80-81)</i></p>

The last representation of women as mothers has been found in all three poems. Starting in lines 1–2 of the poem “Women Work,” the speaker’s focus is on taking care of her family. This indicates that women are traditionally the family caregivers, according to Fisher and Tronto (2003), in which they are expected to prioritize tending to their families. This context is also observed from lines 1-4 of “Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me,” in which the

speaker states that her mother's purpose is to take care of her as soon as she is born, implying the expectation of mothers as caregivers. In lines 3–10, it introduces a myriad of other chores that fill her daily life, from cleaning and grocery shopping to cooking and caring for an infant, which emphasizes the mundane and repetitive nature of women's domestic responsibilities.

In "Momma Welfare Roll," the lines 7-11 elaborate on the character as a woman living with her children while experiencing poverty, which it had been difficult for her to raise. Therefore, that confirms a mother's presence in the poem that faces the hardships of poverty.

Back to "Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me," the lines 7-8, 48-51, and 80-81 indicate the mother's influence and empathy for her children, which is the speaker, for growth, which stemmed from infancy to adulthood. Motherhood's emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual benefits are emphasized, and women's desire to care for others and raise children is viewed as a strength that they should work to re-legitimize rather than suppress (de Marneffe, 2004; Neyer & Bernardi, 2011). In contrast, the speaker claimed in lines 52-53 that she was fortunate to feel strong, healthy, and wealthy that came from the mother's presence. Lastly, the lines 66-69 imply the speaker's proud moment once her mother can learn towards growth as quickly as she thought, which points out the idea that the mother and her children can influence each other's life experiences.

### **Women as Slaves**

Maya Angelou's "Woman Work" powerfully captures the overwhelming experiences of a woman, particularly a black woman, burdened with domestic and labor-intensive tasks reminiscent of a life lacking ownership and autonomy, akin to that of a slave. The lines "*The cane to be cut/ I gotta clean up this hut/ Then see about the sick/ And the cotton to pick*" depict the weight of the speaker's domestic labor, encompassing a spectrum of chores from cooking to cleaning, which becomes increasingly burdensome as her workload continues to grow (Lines 11-14). The repetitive nature of these tasks underscores the perpetual cycle of monotony and exhaustion she endures.

Banks (2019) argues that societal expectations have historically devalued the identity of women, especially black women, by confining them to worker roles influenced by past practices and beliefs. In Because they expected impoverished Black women to work rather than be stay-at-home

mothers like their white counterparts, caseworkers frequently denied them monetary aid in the 1960s. This highlights how black women were not only treated as slaves but also hindered from fulfilling traditional domestic roles.

Small (2020) further emphasizes that African American women were confined to roles in domestic service, facing long working hours, low wages, unreasonable workloads, and verbal abuse under the control of white employers. These women had limited autonomy and were subjected to discriminatory laws, economic oppression, and a lack of education that hindered their prospects for economic independence. The intersectional discrimination they faced as black women working in a predominantly white industry compounded their struggles.

Angelou's portrayal serves as a powerful critique of the economic exploitation, social marginalization, and lack of autonomy that characterized the lives of many black women. From slavery to the present day, black women have been restricted to low-wage, undervalued occupations such as farm labor, domestic service, and other service jobs. They have consistently faced discriminatory practices and policies that have limited their economic opportunities and perpetuated systemic oppression (Lloyd et al., 2020). Despite their hard work and contributions to the economy, black women still endure large pay disparities and are overrepresented in low-paying occupations as compared to their white peers. This history of restricted opportunities and economic discrimination has hindered their ability to achieve economic self-sufficiency and rise above poverty. In essence, Angelou's "Woman Work" speaks to the vigorous and heavy labor endured by black women, reflecting a long history of economic exploitation and social marginalization.

### **Women as Outcasts**

"Momma Welfare Roll" is a poem about a mother who is being discriminated against because of her physical appearance which is seen in the first stanza, lines 1-3 ("*fat triangles / pudgy hands / bones idle under years of fatback*"). According to

Striegel-Moore & Smolak (1996) which is cited by Hesse-Biber in 2004 noted that women who struggled to keep a healthy self-image may also be too concerned with how other people see them, and they might utilize their beauty and physique as a means of constructing a socially acceptable self. The lyric "Her jowls shiver in accusation / Of crimes clichéd by / Repetition" describes how the character loses confidence as a result of continuing to face the things that are said to her. (Lines 5-7, Stanza 1). On the other hand, women often despise themselves due to both their own and other people's perceptions of them. According to Rhode (2016), class advantage is both reflected in and reinforced by appearance. From a class perspective, weight discrimination is especially problematic. discrimination on the basis of also exacerbates gender inequality by perpetuating a double standard and placing women in a difficult situation. Since cultural norms frequently favor those who can afford to maintain particular appearances, the appearance serves to further reinforce class privilege. She lacks the funds to keep up a particular attractive appearance, in contrast to the woman in the poem. Weight-based discrimination aggravates gender and socioeconomic problems. inequality, subjecting women to harsher judgments and double standards.

The lines 12-13 ("*Too fat to whore, / Too mad to work*") are one of the responses to economic inequality which suggests social commentary. This could also be associated with the previous discussion about women as slaves, not just because of their status but also because of racism that results in indifference to treatment. Line 14 ("*searching her dreams for the Lucky sign*") suggests a sense of hopelessness and desperation, as the woman seeks some form of luck or opportunity amidst her hardships. Based on the study of Chulu (2015), gender inequality significantly affects women, particularly in impoverished areas, where men often have greater access to income, political influence, and social rights compared to women. Because gender-based discrimination is so widespread in many areas, poverty disproportionately affects

women. The character's helplessness in the face of unjust institutions and government officials is demonstrated in lines 15-17 ("bare-handed into a den of bureaucrats/ Her portion"). Lewis (1977) asserts that black women are structurally opposed to a dominating racial and sexual group because they belong to two subordinate groups that do not have access to resources and influence in society. Because Black women are members of a minority racial and gender group that does not have access to resources and power, their disadvantages are exacerbated. Due to racism, the character's physical appearance prevents her from readily gaining authority as a Black woman. She finds it difficult to obtain employment or influence. As a result, gender discrimination and inequality prevent women from exercising their rights.

The phrase "Discard me like a broken doll" (Stanza 6, phrase 77) in the poem "Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me" expresses the speaker's fear of being abandoned by her mother and may also allude to the concept that women are treated as less than males. Because of preconceived notions about their skills, dedication, and fit for particular roles, women may experience bias and discrimination. These obstacles may deter women from aiming for high-profile careers and impede their advancement in the workplace. (Dhiman, 2023). Therefore, women are hindered from great opportunities because of biases and misconceptions.

To sum up all of the findings found in this representation, women are being deprived of privileges because society deems them different such as their outside appearance and economic status. Although hindered from these rights, it encapsulates the idea that women will remain unshaken from their unjust treatment.

### **Women as Mothers**

The lines 1-2 ("*I've got the children to tend / The clothes to mend*") from the first stanza "Woman Work" focus on the speaker taking care of her family, playing her role as the mother. Many have looked up to women as being traditionally the family caregivers. The lines 3-10 ("*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.*") talks about the daily routine of the speaker, solely doing her duties as a mother. According to the study of Shrier, et al. (2004), the mother is the primary caregiver for her children. Another evidence for this context is from the lines 1-4 of the first stanza of "Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me" ("*It is true / I was created in you. / It is also true / That you were created for me.*") With that context, the representation of mothers as caregivers is evident, which is her obligation as a maternal figure.

Next with "Momma Welfare Roll," the lines 7-11 in the first stanza ("*...Her children, strangers / To childhood's toys, play / Best the games of darkened doorways, / Rooftop tag, and know the slick feel of / Other people's property.*") shows the image of the speaker, which is a mother that is raising her children amidst the struggles of poverty. According to IvyPanda (2022), childcare is one of the main difficulties that women face. But with that statement, it has been more difficult for a mother to raise a child, especially in a society that is struggling with the effects of poverty.

In "Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me," the lines 7-8 in Stanza 1 ("*Your arms were molded / Into a cradle to hold me, to rock me.*"), lines 48-51 in Stanza 3 ("*The way you posed your head / So that the light could caress your face / When you put your fingers on my hand / And your hand on my arm,*"), and lines 80-81 in Stanza 6 ("*You still find something in me / To cherish, to admire and to love.*") reflects the mother's empathetic nature towards her children, helping them grow over the years. Fisher and Tronto (2003) stated that in this world that we're living in, women are designated to become caregivers automatically. Unfortunately, women are being oppressed and reinforced by the status quo that caring is only a woman's work (Tronto, 1987). A ideal need is that the kid be able to flourish, grow, and reach their full potential as a result of the emotional bond they co-create (Bornstein, Suwalsky & Breakstone, 2012). This connects the idea of women, as mothers and

daughters, being able to empower each other and transform themselves into new growth. With that, the idea of women as a maternal figure will form close bonds with their children due to their innate nature of caring for others, reflecting their overall influence and guidance toward children's development.

A woman, or to be more specific, a mother, is always keen on building a good home (IvyPanda, 2022). This connects to the lines 52-53 on the third stanza ("*I was blessed with a sense of health, / Of strength and very good fortune.*"), which speaks about the mother's proper care towards her children by providing a safe environment for them. Then, in the lines 66-69 from the fifth stanza ("*I grew older and / Was stunned to find / How much knowledge you had gleaned. / And so quickly.*"), the speaker is surprised by her mother's capacity for growth. Laney et al. (2015) talked about the influence of motherhood on women's identity, in which they revealed that they first realized themselves as mothers in the early stages of motherhood, which led to losing their true identity. However, they would be able to regain it over time, which would increase their awareness and make them more susceptible to the negative effects of motherhood. This illustrates the notion that mothers and their offspring might have an impact on one another by assisting them in achieving the objective of personal development.

These findings emphasized the role of women as mothers in the sense that they were known to be 'caregivers' due to their empathy towards other people, especially their children. Despite the struggles, stereotypes, and blessings that were brought during one's motherhood, it speaks to the resilience of mothers to provide a good living for their children, guiding them towards growth. These experiences will push them to become stronger individuals by sharing their influence with their children, which could also result in their self-development.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the three selected poems of Maya Angelou stressed the representation of women per poem: a slave, an outcast, and a mother. The poems offer themes surrounding women's experiences, identities, and relationships. From the challenges of societal expectations and gender roles to the resilience and strength exhibited by women, these verses delve into the complexities of womanhood. Through a feminist perspective, the poems illuminate the struggles, joys, and aspirations of women across different contexts and periods.

Moreover, the feminist perspective applied to these verses underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing women's agency, autonomy, and emotional labor. Whether challenging traditional gender norms, celebrating emotional expression, or advocating for equality and empowerment, the poems invite readers to engage critically with the complexities of women's lived experiences.

To sum up, these excerpts offer profound insights into the complexities of womanhood, highlighting the resilience and strength of women in navigating societal expectations and personal challenges. They invite reflections on the diverse experiences and contributions of women across different contexts and periods, fostering empathy and appreciation for their multifaceted roles and identities.

This paper will be useful for future researchers in utilizing the feminist literary approach to analyzing poems and short stories across different authors, especially women of color. The researchers suggest that the selected poems will be analyzed based on the author's historical background or the period in which the poems were written to provide more information about the impact of women's discrimination on the readers and empower the female audience against societal expectations.

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