

## **Categorizing the Racist Oppression of African-Americans in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore Maya Angelou's poetic representation of the forms of racist oppression experienced by African-Americans in a White dominant community by employing Iris Marion Young's faces of oppression theory. The paper also attempts to examine how effectively Angelou's anti-racist poetry reflects the negative impact of the various forms of oppression on the life and collective survival of African-Americans. Through the analysis of a selection of Angelou's poems, five forms of racial oppression of Black Americans are identified, namely ethnically-based exploitation, racialized marginalization, African-American powerlessness, White Americans' cultural domination, and racist violence. African-Americans are, thus, portrayed in Angelou's poems as innocent victims of racial discrimination. They suffer humiliation, deprivation, lack of equality, lack of self-respect, lack of self-confidence and loss of power and autonomy. Yet, Angelou, through her poems, expresses her conviction that African-Americans can defiantly struggle and persist to set themselves free from the grip of their White oppressors.

**Keywords:** Maya Angelou, forms of racist oppression, Iris Marion Young, oppression theory, anti-racist poetry

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## Introduction

Maya Angelou (1928-2014), an African-American civil rights activist, poet, playwright and autobiographer, is particularly hailed as one of the most influential, anti-racist poets of the twentieth century. As a Black American woman, Angelou, from an early age, has personally experienced most of the pains and struggles that the entire Black American community faces including racial discrimination, rape, sexual abuse and oppression. Her poetry, thus, is greatly inspired by rich personal experience which enables her to give a sentimental, yet convincing, insight about White American discrimination and oppressive practices against Black American people. In other words, Angelou is able to link her personal life experience and her Black legacy to her poetic manipulation of racial oppression in the American community. Consequently, her poetic works, as Bazregarzadeh (2019) points out, are regarded as "autobiographical sketches" (p. 20) which represent the collective experience of the entire African-American society in a very engaging manner. Throughout her poetry, Angelou manages to expose the painful suffering of African-Americans and their inferiority in a White-centered community. Black Americans, who are supposed to be an essential constituent in the fabric of the American society, harshly experience segregation, exclusion and subjugation.

Consequently, Black Americans suffer the loss of human dignity and self-respect. They also suffer the lack of pride in their Black identity and culture. Moreover, they helplessly endure their White oppressors' acts of injustice, suppression and exploitation. Black Americans, ultimately, fall victims to economic oppression by being exploited for the benefit of a White capitalistic society. They are also politically oppressed by being denied their political rights. In addition, they are culturally oppressed by being stereotyped as bad, ugly, weak and inferior human beings who should be subjugated and more or less treated as a mere commodity to be exploited for some time and then discarded.

In her poetry, Angelou remains remarkably devoted to challenging such a distorted stereotypical image of the people of her own race. She vividly exposes the atrocities committed against them by White American community. In addition, she fulfills, through her poetry, the task of documenting and disclosing the brutality, exploitation and oppression Black Americans receive at the hands of their White counterparts. More significantly, Angelou, according to Simon (2020), transforms her poetry into "a survival strategy" (p. 25) for challenging the various forms of racist oppression that are prevalent in the racist American society. Through her poetry, she also asserts Black people's pride in their race. Furthermore, Angelou, in her poetry, presents herself as a model of the African-American woman who is able to defy her oppressors, celebrate her Black identity and strive for creating a balanced life of equality, justice and freedom. Therefore, by employing Iris Marion Young's faces of oppression theory, the present paper attempts to explore Maya Angelou's poetic representation of the forms of racist oppression experienced by African-Americans in a White dominant society. The paper also aims to examine how effectively Angelou's anti-racist poetry reflects the negative impact of the various forms of oppression on the life and collective survival of African-Americans.

### **Literature Review**

Maya Angelou's poetry has always been much investigated by numerous scholars and critics. A large number of scholarly and critical articles have approached Angelou's poetry from a Black feminist perspective. In her article titled "Black Feminism as a Structure of Dual Resistance in Maya Angelou's Select Poem," Laskar (2022), for instance, discusses Maya Angelou's poetry from a Black feminist perspective. He explains that Angelou's poetry reveals two main types of Black female resistance. The first refers to Black women's resistance against Black patriarchal domination. The second type refers to resisting the hegemony of White American community. Laskar cites Angelou's poems "Phenomenal Women" and "Equality" as examples of dual resistance. In his analysis of these two poems, he shows how Angelou deals with the negative

impact of patriarchy and White domination on Black American women. He also clarifies how Angelou manages to express through her poetry Black women's powerful voice in their struggle for freedom.

Similarly, in an article entitled "The Voice of African-American Women: Feminist Voice in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems," Sameer and Ali (2020) attempt a feminist study of Angelou's poetry. They argue that Angelou's personal experience of oppression is evidently reflected in her poetry. They also illustrate how Angelou's poetic persona represents the voice of the oppressed Black women who struggle against White supremacy. In addition, they shed light on Black women's attempts to defy their negative, stereotypical image which is supported by a racist White community. In the article's conclusion, Sameer and Ali maintain that Angelou, as a Black poet, is keen on depicting Black woman's resourcefulness in resisting the racial discrimination and oppression of White society and asserting her Black female identity as manifested in her poems "Phenomenal Women," "Woman Work," "Still I Rise" and "Equality".

In the same vein, Sadaf and Rahman (2023), in an article entitled "Representing Dissent through Poetry: A Study of Select Poems of Maya Angelou," analyze Angelou's Black feminist poetry as a form of protest poetry. They investigate Angelou's representation of Black American resistance not only against Black male domination but also White American racism. Their insightful analysis of Angelou's selected poems reveals that Angelou, as a female African-American citizen, personally experiences injustice and, thus, seeks to inspire social change. Angelou's tone of resentment in her poems, according to Sadaf and Rahman's article, spurs Black American women to resist and challenge the dominant social norms which deny Black women's rights and tolerate their unjust treatment by both Black males and White masters.

Along similar lines, Mustantifa and Nurmaily (2022) in an article titled "Maya Angelou's ideas on African-American Women's Self-Esteem Reflected in Selected Poems" study Angelou's poetry in

terms of feminist struggle and resistance. The Black persona in her poems is identifying with Black American women who experience misery and suffering as a result of their exclusion from social participation and interaction. They suffer a severe sense of inferiority and worthlessness in particular. Thus, the female voice of resistance is too loud to be repressed or silenced. Angelou's female persona always asserts her need for self-respect and self-confidence. Her poems often cite examples of Black American women who are highly appreciated for their success in making changes and realizing their self-esteem. Mustantifa and Nurmaily's article, in this sense, focuses on all the ways through which Black American females reject their humiliation and, instead, assert their self-respect.

In addition, in Aslam's (2021) article entitled "A Study of Endurance and Aspiration in Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" (1968) and "Still I Rise" (1978)," two significant aspects which help formulate Angelou's self-sustained identity, namely endurance and aspiration, are studied from a feminist perspective. These two aspects also constitute Angelou's survival strategies as a Black female poet living in a White dominant community. In her article, Aslam illustrates how Angelou's consciousness has developed from a submissive, enduring woman who is trapped within the shackles of a White racist society as manifested in her poem "Caged Bird" to a revolutionary woman whose aspirations for freedom and self-actualization are powerfully articulated as evident in her poem "Still I Rise". Moreover, Angelou's enthusiastic tone of determination and persistence in both poems reveals her moral commitment to assert the collective Black female identity. Thus, in her suffering and struggle for freedom, she does not convey a personal experience. Rather she collectively represents the hopes and aspirations of all Black American women.

Some scholarly and critical articles, however, have dealt with Angelou's poetry from an anti-racist perspective. Qaseem (2023), for instance, in her article titled "Peeking through Maya Angelou's Poetry in the Context of Racialism and Servitude," explores Angelou's representation of White American community and its

racist practices and hostilities against Black people. She analyzes Angelou's poetry focusing on such racial issues as discrimination, servility and prejudice. Qaseem also investigates the negative impact of these racial issues on Black Americans particularly women as illustrated in Angelou's poetry. Angelou's poetry foregrounds Black subjugation and social exclusion as the inevitable consequence of racial discrimination. Qaseem argues that the racist acts of injustice and inequalities, which are represented in Angelou's poetry, reside in an institutional, hegemonic system of discrimination. She concludes her article by highlighting Angelou's rejection of this type of systemic racism and her call for action to change this oppressive system and create, instead, a well-balanced, non-racist community.

In a similar vein, Ismail (2021), in his article "Racism and Social Segregation in Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird," attempts a racist study of Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" by embarking on the racist policies of White American society. He shows how Angelou's selected poem presents a well-developed exploration of the impact of racism on Black people. He argues that Angelou manages to achieve this by juxtaposing the free world of White Americans with the unjust world of Black people. He also underscores the significant influence of Angelou's biographical background and personal experience on her metaphorical language and distinctive tone in "Caged Bird". Furthermore, he explains how Angelou's traumatic life experience is obviously reflected in her poem. In addition, Ismail's article delves into the ethnically segregated world of Black Americans symbolized by the cage in which the Black bird is trapped. The article finally concludes with an illustration of the anti-racist strategies that are employed in Angelou's poem.

Mahmood (2019), likewise, studies Angelou's poetry from a socio-racial perspective in his article "Overt and Institutional Racism in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems". He analyzes some selected poems from Angelou's first collection entitled *Just Give Me Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*. He focuses on the social background of Black American society and shows how Black segregated life is one of the major evils of racism in the American

racist community. Mahmood elaborates on White American racism by giving a precise definition of racism and discussing its two main categories, namely the overt and the institutional. He illustrates how these two categories of racism are reflected in Angelou's poems and how her poems are replete with pathetic scenes of suffering and victimization as a result of racial discrimination and racist cultural legacy. He finally concludes with Angelou's awareness of Black Americans' real need for getting social, political and economic equal rights.

Other scholars and critics have analyzed prominent stylistic and technical aspects in Angelou's poetry. In "Repetition: A Mirror of Trauma in the Select Poems of Maya Angelou," Kumar and Gayathri (2022) for instance, analyze the prominent stylistic devices utilized by Angelo in her poems. They select ten of Angelou's poems and identify the various styles of narration used in these poems such as the use of the first and third person pronouns in narration, colloquial speech rhythm and visual imagery. All such styles are employed to reflect the poet's personal suffering and experiences. One of the major stylistic devices in Angelou's selected poems that Kumar and Gayathri focus on is repetition. They define what repetition means and why it is recurrently employed in Angelou's poetry. They explain that repetition is one of the main stylistic features that characterize the speech of a traumatized subject. Repetition, thus, reflects the poet's inner struggle and emotional stress. It is also used to attract the reader's attention and emphasize the poet's changing moods. Kumar and Gayathri conclude their article by observing that refrain and anaphora are the most common forms of repetition utilized by Angelou in her poetry.

Similarly, Sih (2020), in an article titled "A Stylistic Analysis of Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and "Equality," attempts a detailed stylistic analysis of all the devices and tools used by Angelou in her poems "Caged Bird" and "Equality". He, for instance, analyzes the graphological features in both poems focusing on such features as the number of inconsistent lines and punctuation marks. He also attempts a semantic and lexical

analysis paying attention to the poet's word choice and the use of collocations. Part of the analysis is phonological and it investigates the prevalent sounds, alliteration, assonance and consonance. A syntactic analysis is also conducted analyzing phrases, clauses, words and conjunctions. There is also a morphological analysis including the use of adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, prefixes and suffixes. In addition, Sih's article refers to Angelou's use of repetition, imagery, contrast, paradox and figures of speech including metaphors, personifications and hyperboles. Sih concludes his article by clarifying the stylistic effects such tools have on the poet's intended meaning and the emotions conveyed throughout the lines of the two selected poems.

In "Figurative Language Analysis in a Poetry Entitled 'Life Does Not Frighten Me', 'Equality', and 'Alone', by Maya Angelou," Hidayah and Purba (2021), in a similar vein, analyze the figures of speech used in Angelou's selected poems. Their analysis basically relies on Laurence Perrine's theorization of the common types of figures of speech used in poetry. In their article, they refer to all the various types of figures used in Angelou's poems such as metaphor, simile, personification, synecdoche, apostrophe, metonymy, hyperbole, allegory, symbol and irony. After counting the frequent uses of all these figures in the three poems, Hidayah and Purba remark that hyperbole is the most frequently used figure of speech due to its positive effect in creating intensive feeling and giving readers the ability to use their imagination. They also observe that the least frequently used figures are irony and paradox because there is no real need for them in portraying the real life scenes that distinguish Angelou's poetry. Hidayah and Purba conclude their analysis by stressing the importance of figures of speech in communicating the hidden messages that Angelou attempts to convey throughout her poems.

Sidiq and Majeed (2022), along similar lines, in their article titled "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Selected Poems of Maya Angelou ('Equality,' 'Caged Bird' and Other Poems as Examples)," analyze the figures of speech used by Angelou in five selected



poems. In their analysis, they employ the critical discourse analysis model developed by Fairclough. They start their article by providing a theoretical background in which they discuss the main approaches and theories of both Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis. They, then, provide a detailed analysis of all the various types of figures of speech used in the five selected poems. In the article's conclusion, they point out that Angelou, by using various figures of speech in her poems, skillfully manages to convey the figurative meanings and implicit messages which are hidden behind the surface, literal meanings of the poems' words and expressions.

All such scholarly and critical exploration of Angelou's poetry has dealt with three areas of critical investigation, namely Black feminist studies, anti-racism studies and stylistic and critical discourse analysis studies. Yet, the representation of the various forms of racist oppression in Maya Angelou's poetry from the perspective of Iris Marion Young's faces of oppression theory has never before been analyzed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present paper's investigation of the forms of racist oppression within the American community is conducted by drawing heavily on Iris Marion Young's faces of oppression theory as discussed in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990). In this seminal work, Young embarks on exploring the notion of oppression and the concept of structural injustice. According to Young's (1990, p. 37) view, there are two main sources of structural injustice, namely oppression and domination. She defines oppression as a social structural process in which one's "self-development" (1990, p. 37) is institutionally constrained. Such a structural process is intrusively inherent in people's social norms, traditions and habits. On the other hand, she defines domination as a social process in which one's "self-determination" (1990, p. 37) is institutionally constrained. Both sources of injustice, thus, are social in nature and are associated with one's lack of power and free will. Young argues that what is basically responsible for the existence of oppression and domination in society is not only the unjust

distribution of resources, rights and opportunities, but also the institutional processes which deprive some individuals from expressing themselves freely, developing their capabilities and participating in decision making.

Oppression, according to Young (1990, p. 38), is caused by the unequal positions of people in society. Differences in people's social positioning certainly create powerful social groups of people who benefit from their social positions to dominate the powerless groups, restrict their freedom and constrain their opportunities to exercise their abilities and fully participate in social interactions. The oppressed groups, thus, experience suffering and injustice as a result of numerous oppressive, conscious and unconscious, everyday practices in all aspects of life whether politically, economically, culturally or socially. Young's theory of oppression, in this sense, attempts to explore these structural processes and the social institutions that are responsible for creating inequalities and oppression.

Moreover, what specifically accounts for the emergence of oppression in a society, as Young (1990, p. 47) maintains, is the community's division into social groups. She explains that the individuals of a society inevitably suffer oppression when they are entirely excluded from certain groups due to their association to other groups. The members of a community focus more on the differences, rather than the affinities, between social groups. The privileged group represents the norms while the other groups are more or less deviations and are, thus, more prone to oppression. In other words, when a specific social group is privileged while the other groups in a society are ignored, silenced and oppressed, then the experience of the privileged group is regarded as the norm and any different experience of the other groups are mere deviations. This act of prioritizing the experience of a privileged social group is in itself an act of oppression.

To stop this process of domination, as Young (1990, p. 47) suggests, the attributes and unique identity of each social group should be acknowledged and ultimately respected. Young (2001, p.

4), for instance, cites racial discrimination against African-Americans as an example of ethnicity-based oppression of an underprivileged social group. She argues that ethnic discrimination constrains the freedom and well-being of African-Americans and regards their black skin as a justifiably cultural sign of exclusion and inferiority. At the same time, it privileges White Americans by giving them more opportunities. The process of oppression as such, Young (1990, p. 40) maintains, cannot be approached as a single, unitary condition bringing under one umbrella all the different attributes of oppressed individuals. Rather, oppression, according to Young, has five distinct forms, namely exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. From Young's perspective, all these forms of oppression are remarkably significant and all are equally prioritized in the sense that there is no form of oppression which is superior to the others.

Exploitation is the first of Young's forms of oppression. According to Young (1990, pp. 48-53), the exploitative relation is simply a relation of power, domination, hegemony and inequality between social groups in which the benefit of labor and energy of one group is transferred to another group. To put it differently, exploitation refers to an oppressive relation of subordination whereby different groups of people are divided into two categories: exploited and exploiters. The exploited groups lack equality and are deprived of exercising power and authority. Thus, they remain subordinated and oppressed. An example of exploitation, as a prominent form of oppression, is gender exploitation in which women's energies and labor are expended domestically at home and in workplaces to benefit their husbands and their employers. Another instance of exploitation is racially-based exploitation in which certain jobs, for example, are assigned to specific races such as the jobs requiring menial labor some of which are porters, chambermaids, servants and construction workers. Such jobs are often given to Black people or Latinos within the American community. Such people's efforts and energies are expended for the benefit of their employers socially, financially and vocationally.

This process of exploitation is not an individual enterprise. Rather, it is a systematic social structure which oppressively causes lack of equality and loss of power and self-respect. It is not possible, as Young (1990, p. 53) suggests, for a society to eliminate or even reduce exploitation by merely redistributing the benefit which mainly goes to specific groups. To reduce exploitation, there is a real need to reorganize the systemic structure of social groups within a community and change their oppressive practices and their stereotypical culture.

Young's second form of oppression is marginalization. According to Young's (1990, pp. 53-55) theorization, marginalization refers to the exclusion of people of a certain social group from active engagement in their society. Accordingly, the marginalized people severely suffer material and non-material deprivation. Material deprivation refers to lack of education, health care, shelter and food, whereas non-material deprivation involves lack of self-respect, lack of freedom of choice and a sense of boredom and uselessness in addition to lack of privacy. Consequently, the marginals fall victims of injustice and oppression in two ways. Firstly, they are deprived of sharing equal rights with others. Secondly, they are also deprived of the same opportunities given to others to practice their abilities freely in different social contexts. Young (1990, p. 53) cites examples of marginalized people including the aged, the sick, the disabled and the single mothers and their helpless children. She also cites other examples of people who are socially marginalized all over the world due to their race such as African-Americans. Such marginals are physically weak and are, thus, dominated by others who deprive them of their rights and of their opportunities to assert their capacities, interact with others and become socially recognized. They end up being entirely excluded from social life and living in total deprivation. Hence, they seriously suffer injustice and oppression.

Marginalization, therefore, from Young's (1990, p. 53) perspective, is the most extremely harmful form of oppression. This is simply because the marginals are unjustly denied their rights of

expressing themselves freely and showing their capacities in a socially accepted manner. Furthermore, helpless people who badly need the assistance of others and who cannot live independently such as sick people, children and the aged are desperately deprived of their rights in having their free will and making decisions. As a result of their passive dependence, they are totally excluded, marginalized and oppressed. What is really challenging, though, is that the number of marginals is terribly increasing in most societies. To avoid the devastating effects of marginalization, as Young (1990, p. 55) argues, inclusion of the marginals into social institution is not enough. What is more important is to make sure that these marginalized individuals are treated justly. Hence, social institutions have to suggest some social policies which are supposed to compensate those marginals at least materially.

Powerlessness is the third form of oppression in Young's theory. According to Young (1990, pp. 56-58), powerlessness refers to the lack of direct power and autonomy which are manifest in practicing work capabilities, exercising talents and creative abilities as well as expressing oneself freely. It also refers to the lack of indirect power which is realized through representing people or mediating between conflicting individuals. The powerless, in this sense, are those who never exercise power or practice authority. They have no chance to be autonomous in their work. They also have no chance to be creative or to develop their capacities and skills. In addition, they lack the power to take decisions even in matters that concern their own lives. Furthermore, they lack the sense of respectability in all aspects of life in the sense that they are not treated respectfully in their social milieu due to their low social status. They, thus, receive orders from others while not being able to give orders. This is the case of the minority groups of which Black Americans are an example. Those Black Americans are denied their right of taking decisions. They lack representation in the parliament in such a democratic community. They, as a result, lack authority and social respect. Another example of a powerless group is the class of non-professional workers who fall victims to the social division between

professional and non-professional workers. Such helpless groups are ultimately destined to suffer injustice and oppression due to their powerlessness.

Cultural imperialism is the fourth form in Young's theory of oppression. It refers, as Young (1990, pp. 58-60) points out, to the predominance of the culture and experience, including the goals, values and achievements, of a specific social group over the others. Their culture, in this sense, becomes the dominant culture. They have full control of the available methods of social communication through which they universalize their own culture and their own perspective in all aspects of life. Their cultural values and experiences become the recognized norms of society and are consequently imposed upon the other groups who are deprived from gaining similar experiences. This, by implication, entails the lack of recognition and the repression of the culture, values and experience of the non-dominant groups who are negatively stereotyped and distorted. The culture of these non-dominant groups is regarded as the culture of the inferior other, the outsider or the abnormal. Their culture is doomed to be a deviation from the accepted norms. The relation between the members of a dominant group and those of the non-dominant group is not reciprocal in the sense that the culture and values of the former group strongly affects, but is not affected by, the culture and values of the latter group. This lack of reciprocal interaction is the real source of oppression.

Moreover, the oppressed people of such inferior groups suffer a double type of consciousness. This implies that the inferior group has two different ways of perceiving their images. The first is the stereotyped, inferior image of themselves as people who are deviating from the norms and, thus, remain exceptional and differentiated. The second is the real image of themselves as people who are entirely ignored and lack recognition. This is the image which focuses on their own capacities as human individuals who have potentials and a sense of achievement. Such aspects are not recognized by the dominant culture. They are, thus, forced to accept the dominant culture and live accordingly.

The fifth and final form of oppression in Young's theory is violence. According to Young (1990, pp. 61-63), oppressive violence is the socially legitimized practice of systematic violence. This type of systematic violence takes both physical and non-physical forms including murder, intimidation, rape, harassment, terrorism, ridicule and abuse. Such forms of violence are perpetrated by members of dominant groups on members of non-dominant groups to humiliate or harm them. Acts of violence are legitimized in the sense that there is no punishment for those committing violence. Oppressive violence is also systematic to the degree that the members of non-dominant groups are expected to receive unjustified, violent attacks from members of dominant groups. Such attacks randomly and repeatedly occur since they are socially accepted by social institutions and regarded as socially approved norms. These acts of violence, nonetheless, are, in reality, irrational in the sense that they have no logical motive behind them. The members of an oppressed group, in consequence, are helplessly deprived of leading a dignified life. Sometimes they feel obliged to hide their true identities to protect themselves from such oppressive attacks.

Violence, as Young (1990, p. 62) explains, basically emerges as a logical consequence of the community's assimilation of the cultural conceptions of imperialism and dominance. Acts of oppressive violence are, thus, committed by people who belong to a dominant group against those of an oppressed group as a sign of their power and ability to control others. Examples of these oppressed people who are victims of violence are women, Black people and children. Such oppressed people are exposed to both physical and emotional violence. Acts of violence, however, are always tolerated. This is simply because they are regarded as appropriate methods of imposing order and discipline. Consequently, they become an essential part of the social norms that prevail in different social institutions such as marriage and family. Oppressive violence, in this sense, is indirectly caused by the process of cultural imperialism which accounts for legalizing the

unjustified use of violence by dominant groups against powerless, dominated groups. The result of this culturally-based dominance is the emergence of several forms of violence in society of which racist violence and ethnic cleansing are tangible instances.

What is particularly remarkable about Young's conceptualization of these five forms of oppression, as Mancenido-Bolanos (2020, p. 107) rightly observes, is the fact that it is not necessary for a social group to experience all the five forms of oppression together in one and the same context to be categorized as oppressed. Rather, experiencing just one form of oppression is simply enough for members of a dominated group to be oppressed. What is more peculiar still is the fact that the oppressed groups in a community are identified in terms of the unique form of oppression perpetrated on them. African-Americans, for instance, severely experience racist oppression represented by racially-based discrimination, violence, exclusion and exploitation. Likewise, women in patriarchal societies experience gender oppression illustrated by sexual abuse, violence, rape and domestic exploitation. To curtail the devastating impact of this systematic process of oppression, Young (1990, p. 63) asserts, there is a real necessity to change the negative cultural attitude towards group differences. Unquestionably, changing the unjust policies that control people's social relations is also required. Ultimately, removing the negative, stereotypical images associated with non-dominant groups in society is crucial.

### **Maya Angelou as a Poetic Voice of African-American Community**

Throughout her poetry, Maya Angelou lends a strong voice to Black Americans who suffer severely due to their oppression. She discloses, as Guha (2015, p. 55) remarks, the pains and agony of African-Americans whose voices are intentionally silenced and suppressed by their White oppressors throughout their long struggle for equality. Angelou devotedly takes upon herself the responsibility to be Black people's spokesperson and defiantly advocate their right of leading a life of freedom and self-actualization. Moreover,



Angelou, in her anti-oppression poetry, explores Black Americans' horrible realities and the hardships and painful experiences they have lived and endured under a White Americans' oppressive system. By capturing the provocative scenes of their brutal dehumanization and degradation, Angelou's poems underscore how oppressed and downtrodden Black Americans are in contrast to their White counterparts who gain the profits of their superiority and domination. Such a contrast serves to reveal the negative impact of subjugation and racial discrimination on African-Americans.

Angelou, as a Black American poet, gives in her poems a detailed account of the miserable realities of African-American life within a White-dominated society. Her poems depict how the racist discrimination policy of such a society has tragically led to the distortion of Black culture, the deterioration of Black people's life, the loss of their identities and, ultimately, their domination. Simon (2020) ascribes this to the fact that Black culture is an "oral" (p. 29) one which has never been documented and is, thus, easy to be distorted and entirely discarded. Angelou's poems are also concerned with the racist nuances and oppressive practices which reflect White prejudice and hatred towards Black people. In addition, her poems portray how Black people's life is loaded with much suffering and deprivation in all its aspects whether economically, politically, socially, culturally or even psychologically. Part of Black people's misery is due to their treatment as a commodity or an ugly other. Such stereotyping unarguably shows White Americans' lack of respect and rejection of the Black race. This obviously explains why White Americans enforce a policy of exploitation and marginalization upon their Black counterparts creating, thus, a large gap between the two races. The superior and privileged race is, thus, the White race who lives at the center, whereas the inferior and oppressed race is that of the Black who remains at the margin.

Angelou's poetry, in this sense, is a poetry of protest in which she condemns these racist violations and abuses. She also asserts Black Americans' right of rejecting and challenging such racial

practices and expressing pride in their black skin. Therefore, Angelou, as Ghani and Naz (2007, p. 101) put it, is often referred to as a poetic voice whose poetry documents the endurance, persistence and struggle of Black people for the sake of survival. Angelou, in this sense, employs her poetry as a strategy of resistance through which she challenges White Americans' hegemony, questions their segregation policy and expresses her frustration and resentment against their racism and injustice. She also condemns, as Qaseem (2023, p. 22) points out, White Americans' systemic, social practice of oppression which is based on their dominant racial culture and unjust social norms. By so doing, Angelou strives to eliminate segregation and inequalities and seeks to help the Black people of her race to stand on an equal footing with the White.

Unquestionably, Angelou's personal life experience of racism and oppression and her awareness that her personal misery represents the collective suffering of all African-Americans fuel her poetry with anti-racist sentiments and makes it strikingly resonant. Thus, in her poetry, she, as Isti'anah et al. (2020, p. 56) argue, manages to give an accurate depiction of the oppressive experiences she has witnessed in her personal life as an African-American citizen and as a woman. Furthermore, throughout her poetic career, Angelou, as Joshi (2020) asserts, is daring enough to reveal her real identity as a Black woman, narrate her traumatic past and use "her own voice" (p. 1110). This, undoubtedly, makes her poetic voice more convincing in identifying with the powerless and marginalized people of her Black community and in exposing their adversity. Hence, the use of the first-person singular pronouns 'I' and 'me' in addition to the use of the personal language of self-assertion are given prominence in her poems. The subjectivity of her poetic perspective and her personalized language are not only meant to convey her personal experience but also the shared experience and collective voice of the entire Black race. Her aim is to reach the highest level of collective identification and preach solidarity and persistence in resisting oppression and subjugation. What follows,

then, is an exploration of five forms of racist oppression as manifested in Angelou's selected poems.

### 1) Ethnically-based Exploitation

In American society where discrimination and racism prevail, African-Americans have suffered a lot of problems and hardships due to their black complexion. Part of the ethnic discrimination and oppression of African-Americans is their inhumane treatment and exploitation by their White counterparts. Maya Angelou, through her poetry, depicts how Black Americans are engaged in hard labor, and menial jobs that are low-paid. Black Americans are also described as leading a slave-like life even after the abolition of slavery. This is shown in the way they are treated as commodities, in the inappropriate meals they have and in their physical punishment at the hands of their White employers. This deplorable situation is aptly incarnated by Angelou in such poems as "Woman Work," "When I Think About Myself" and "One More Round" (see Appendix).

In "Woman Work," a five-stanza poem from Angelou's third collection of poetry entitled *And Still I Rise* (1978), the persona fully exposes the oppression and degradation of African-American women whose lives are worth nothing but meaninglessness and never-ending tediousness. The poem presents a detailed account of the daily life of these Black women and their flight into the world of imagination and natural beauty in an attempt to find a temporary outlet away from their life of exhaustion.

In its long opening stanza, the poem catalogues a list of the daily domestic chores a Black woman is responsible for:

I've got the children to tend  
the clothes to mend

.....

And the cotton to pick (Angelou, 1994, p. 153).

The poem's persona is directly engaged in this domestic scene by using the first-person subject pronoun "I". The scene depicts the miserable life of exploitation not only of the poem's persona but also all Black women. These women are alike in their common

responsibilities and domestic tasks. This signifies that the persona is not just referring to herself, but to all Black women who badly need one collective voice to speak for them. The Black woman's daily routine described in the opening scene is really gruesome as it includes the following list: tending children, stitching clothes, mobbing floors, going grocery shopping, cooking, caring for babies, hosting visitors, weeding out the garden, ironing shirts, dressing toddlers, taking care of the sick member of the family and cleaning her small dwelling cottage. This long list does not only stop at this point. It also extends to other responsibilities the woman has to fulfil outside home which include cutting sugar cane and picking up cotton in the field.

Woman's energies, thus, are expended in two different settings: inside the house and in plantations. It is quite noticeable from the long list of detailed domestic chores given in the opening stanza that the Black woman plays different roles in her life. She is a housekeeper, maid, nanny, caretaker, cook, nurse, hostess and, ultimately, farm worker. Such roles represent Black women's daily responsibilities. They are all menial work which are tough, demanding and monotonous.

What is peculiar throughout the lines of the first stanza is the use of the definite article 'the', instead of the possessive adjective 'my' in regard to all the tasks the woman is required to do on a daily basis. The persona, for instance, mentions "the children," "the clothes," "the floor," "the baby," "the garden" and "the tots" (Angelou, 1994, p. 153). This significantly means that the woman claims nothing of such elements as her own. Even the small cottage where she is living is not her own. This simply implies that this helpless woman is terribly exploited and her efforts are exhaustingly expended, not for her own benefit, but for the benefit of the White master. The woman, thus, finds herself helplessly confined to the endless chain of these never-ending chores and burdened with the domesticity of her dreary, routine life.

The woman, in consequence, falls a victim to exploitation and is easily robbed of her sense of humanity and her sense of freedom.

What adds to the woman's pathetic situation is the fact that she lacks the ability to abhor or complain about the White master's violation of her rights. Significantly, she never utters any feelings of dissatisfaction, anger or despair. This pathetically exposes the miserable reality of the Black woman who is more or less treated as a mere machine owned and managed by an oppressive system of White domination. This helpless woman, according to Naqvi et al. (2015, p. 533), is psychologically and mentally suffering due to her exploitation and degradation to the degree of being regarded as a commodity to be bought and owned and to the degree of being worth no more than a mere property in the household. This depiction of the woman's psychological suffering reveals how intense her feelings of racist oppression are. This dark reality is foregrounded in the first stanza by highlighting the woman's sense of physical and psychological weariness as a result of her hectic life. This negative sense is revealed through the lack of commas and through the use of a fast pace and run-on lines throughout the lines of the first stanza. These aspects are fitting for the description of the woman's fast movements in performing such daily tasks as mending, mopping, shopping, pressing, dressing and picking. In such a hectic, monotonous atmosphere of merciless exploitation, the woman remains utterly helpless.

From the second stanza onwards, the scene moves to a different setting. It is the natural setting away from the domestic world of boredom and tiredness. There is also a shift of atmosphere from weariness to tranquility and comfort. In the second stanza, the poem's persona addresses the sun, rain and dewdrops in a passionately appealing tone. She needs to immerse both her body and soul in the warm rays of the sun, the refreshing rain and the cool dewdrops. What she really seeks here is to get physical and psychological purification of her stress and restlessness by coming in physical contact with such elements of natural purification as rain and dewdrops. She also seeks the warmth, intimacy and liveliness of nature as represented by the sun shining on her and the rain and

drops of dew falling softly on her body to cool her after an exhausting day of overwork.

In the third stanza, the woman-speaker addresses another element of nature, namely the storm. She pleads to the storm to blow fiercely and carry her away from her domestic setting. She also wishes to be floating in the sky with the pushing power of the stormy wind. To the woman, just carrying her away is a source of comfort and restfulness. The woman's floating is emotionally performed through her soul and the effect is sustaining her soul and renewing her capability of endurance. It is ironic here to find that the woman prefers the fierceness and cruelty of nature represented by the storm to the mundane reality of her domestic life. The fierce and wild elements of nature unexpectedly have a soothing effect and are, thus, personified as a gentle, kind companion to the woman. A wintery, natural scene is also introduced in the fourth stanza with the image of snowflakes and white ice. The poem's persona implores the snowflakes to fall gently on her and cover her body with the falling white ice. The intimate relationship between the Black woman and the natural elements is skillfully represented through the personification of snowflakes as kind friends who shower the woman with kisses. The gentle touch of winter with its snow has the effect of purifying her and giving her a positive sense of temporary relaxation during the night before her daily routine starts anew.

The woman's intimate relation to the natural landscape culminates in the final stanza with her claiming of all the natural elements surrounding her to be her own. Her list of intimate objects includes the sun, rain, sky, oceans, mountains, leaves of trees, stones, shining stars and the glowing moon. As a matter of fact, this Black woman owns nothing in her domestic life and nobody belongs to her. She is confined to her dreary routine with no real friends or honest companions to keep her company. Thus, she seeks companionship in nature. This justifies why she addresses natural elements, using apostrophes, as if they were human beings. This also accounts for her claim of owning them which means that she reaches full identification with them. Nature, in a sense, provides an

emotional relief to the woman. It enables her to take a respite from her stressful work. In other words, it is a main source of escapism, solace and refuge for her. It is also a source of emotional fulfillment and freedom as incarnated in the wind and the sky. The helpless Black woman, As Isti'anah et al. (2020, p. 67) and Yustisiana (2018, p. 166) assert, finds in nature the last refuge that allows her to escape temporarily from the boring life of exploitation and White domination. The world of nature, in this sense, is represented as more comforting, more sustaining and more peaceful than the merciless world of humans.

Similarly, Angelou's three-stanza poem entitled "When I Think About Myself" presents an ironic protest against the exploitation of Black Americans who defiantly struggle for survival in the unjust world of White oppression. Although the poem's title apparently suggests the subjectivity of a speaker's personal experience as revealed in the use of the first-person subject pronoun 'I', the poem itself is rendered in the collective voice of the whole Black American race. In this poem, Angelou, as Kumar and Gayathri (2022, p. 2112) argue, is much concerned with the collective struggle, overwhelming distress and growing dissatisfaction of Black people against White Americans' systematic practices of injustice and exploitation. The poet skillfully manages to give a paradoxical expression of the Blacks' suffering through the ironic laughing of the poem's persona. Throughout the lines, the persona reveals the dark aspects of her life as a Black woman. She also describes the challenges and struggles faced by Black American people in their life. Angelou introduces her unidentified persona as a Black maid who works for a White American family. She is also presented as thinking and acting nonsensically in an attempt to cope with her humiliating life, though her dark situation is inescapable.

When I think about myself,

I almost laugh myself to death,

My life has been one great big joke (Angelou, 1994, p. 29).

In the first stanza, the poem's persona contemplates the meaning and value of her life as a Black woman. She also attempts to give an

entire assessment of her past life. The result of her contemplation and assessment is not an expression of her contentment as might be expected. On the contrary, she bursts into hysteric laughter as she unexpectedly finds out that her life is too difficult to take seriously, and, hence, turns out to be a 'big joke'. Here, the persona metaphorically compares her life to a dance she has walked. She also compares her life to a song she has spoken. Significantly, the action of dancing, which is symbolically associated with energy, joy and excitement, is reduced to a mere act of walking which suggests monotony and boredom.

Likewise, singing, which stands for vitality and liveliness, is reduced to speaking which is related to boredom and lack of vitality. This paradoxical association signifies that the woman-speaker's life unexpectedly goes against her will. She has no control upon her own life. This explains why she repeatedly bursts into laughing. The speaker's laughing is compared to death and choking. The poet brings the three words 'death', 'choke' and 'laugh' (Angelou, 1994, p. 29) together to convey the intensity and stress of her life in an oppressive world and the difficulty of coping with this intolerable life.

In stanza two, the poem's persona, who is an aged Black woman of sixty years, appears to be distressed, aloof and, thus, stays at a distance from the social life of the community as clarified in her reference to the world of the White using the words "these folks' world" (Angelou, 1994, p. 29). The persona's isolation is naturally due to the fact that she feels humiliated and her life is dominated by the White. More frustrating still, the woman-speaker is abused not only by the elders of the White family she works for, but also by a young girl. Instead of treating her respectfully, this White girl is insulting and degrading her by addressing her offensively with the word "girl" (Angelou, 1994, p. 29). The woman-speaker can, thus, do nothing but show obedience and submission by replying her with just one word "ma'am" (Angelou, 1994, p. 29), which shows her inferior social status in contrast to her White counterpart. She is dictated what to do and what to say with no free will of her own.



Undoubtedly, she is fully exploited and oppressed for the benefit of the White family she works for. All she has to do is to endure for the sake of her survival in this merciless community of slavery, exploitation and humility. Nevertheless, the woman-speaker shows her real strength and determination by being resilient and persistent. She never allows herself to be easily defeated or broken since she cares much, not for the opinion of the White world, but for her own dignity and self-respect. What really makes her more resilient and caring for her self-image is the fact that she has no material possessions to lose, no prestigious social position and no fortune or properties. She is leading a life of degradation and exploitation. Thus, by showing self-pride and self-confidence, the speaker attempts to transcend the oppression and lack of recognition of the White community.

In the final stanza, the woman-speaker shifts the focus from contemplating and assessing her own life to the life of all Black Americans whose lives very much resemble hers in suffering and humiliation. Just thinking of the life of these poor Blacks makes her spontaneously laugh to death. What accounts for the speaker's laughter is her realization of the meaninglessness and absurdity of their life and the horrible reality of their situation. Laughing is also her own way of coping with the inhumanity of the world of White Americans. White people's inhumanity and racist oppression is incarnated here in the exploitation of Black people as illustrated in Angelou's line: "They grow the fruit/But eat the rind" (Angelou, 1994, p. 29). This visual image vividly depicts the Black people as poor farmers who work energetically in the fields and grow fruits. Unjustly they find nothing to eat but the rinds. Black people, thus, work hard and sacrifice their happiness and comfort for the benefit of their White masters as indicated in the poet's focus on the action of working in such phrases as "the child I work for" and "for working's sake" (Angelou, 1994, p. 29). Black people, however, receive nothing in return but abuse and degradation. This justifies why the woman-speaker ironically bursts into laughing till she starts to cry. As a matter of fact, the speaker's crying is caused by her

bitter sense of injustice and inequality. Although she apparently laughs, she is well aware of the collective plight of all Black Americans who suffer the unjust treatment and subjugation of the White American community.

What reinforces the description of Black people's painful suffering throughout the poem is the poet's use of ironic contrast between the joyful actions of laughing, dancing and singing on the one hand and the distressing actions of dying, choking, aching and crying on the other hand. There is always a balance between these two contradictory aspects of life in the human world of most ordinary people. Black people's unfair world, however, proves to be extremely distressing, painful and frustrating. Even if they laugh, theirs is inevitably a rueful laugh as in the speaker's case. The use of ironic contrast here serves to highlight the absurdity of the world in which Black people find themselves to be inferiorized, trapped and denied their right of living a free, balanced life.

"One More Round" is another illustration of Angelou's exposition of the exploitation of African-American people in the White-dominated American community. The poem is also an illustration of Angelou's poetic voice of protest against White people's inhumane treatment and racist oppression. Meanwhile, Angelou, by writing such a poem, is giving a serious call to all Black people to stand against their exploitative system of a racist White community. It is a call to resist the enslavement of Black people and the denial of their rights. The word "round" in the title suggests the episodes of struggle and resistance Black people are involved in while rejecting such racially oppressive practices as social segregation, disenfranchisement, discrimination and exploitation.

There ain't no pay beneath the sun  
As sweet as rest when a job's well done.

I was born to work up to my grave (Angelou, 1994, p. 155).

The opening line of the first stanza refers to the hard labor Black people are required to do as evoked in the expression 'beneath the sun'. Black men always have to work in difficult workplaces which

provide them with no sources of protection and in which they are left painfully exposed to the scorching sun. By describing such tough working conditions, the poem's speaker concludes that there is no more rewarding benefit for these Black workers than enjoying a rest after fulfilling a required task. Even financial payment is not rewarding in such a case. The persona describes this rest after work as "sweet" (Angelou, 1994, p. 155). The persona uses the first subject personal pronoun 'I' to implicitly express, in the collective voice of all Black American people, their support and respect for the work ethics. According to these work ethics, working people should be given a rest after work. They should have working hours and a regular rewarding payment. This does not seem to be the case for Black workers who live in a White dominated society. White Americans' exploitation policy imposes harsh work regulations and create such hard conditions of work that all Black people can hardly stand such as working non-stop with low wages, lack of recognition and lack of appreciation of their efforts.

The opening stanza, thus, concludes with the persona's rejection of such oppression and exploitation which are compared to enslavement. The lines of the second stanza are repeated in the fourth, sixth and final stanzas. These refrain stanzas, therefore, serve as a chorus singing, in a collective voice, a song of protest against White people's extreme exploitation and oppression of the Black in the United States. In these protesting stanzas, Black people collectively reveal their bitter feelings of injustice to show that they can no longer tolerate such racist injustice and mercilessness of the White community. They are ready and willing to resist their oppressors and stop their enslavement. In these lines, the poet is calling all Black people to take a unified action against White Americans' injustice. This is emphasized by the repetition of the persona's suggestion "let's heaven it down" (Angelou, 1994, p. 155)

The third stanza opens with a visual image of drudgery in which the persona's father and mother are engaged in hard labor. The father is described as driving steel which suggests the idea that this father is working in the construction field or the manufacturing of steel. The

mother is similarly working as a guard in the same workplace. Although both the father and mother have suffered the intolerable conditions of their tough labor, yet, they have endured and persisted just for surviving and protecting their families. They have never expressed their anger or dissatisfaction. The persona's parents here represent all the Black ancestors whose suffering reflects the history of hard labor and the difficult working conditions they were exposed to. However, the persona shows firmness in rejecting and condemning the enslavement of these Black ancestors. The tough treatment and the heavy load of work assigned to these helpless people certainly turn them into slaves. The poem's refrain "not born to be worked-out slaves" (Angelou, 1994, p. 155) reinforces the poet's anti-slavery and anti-exploitation attitude and reveals her persistent pursuit of the Black rights of justice and equality.

In the fifth stanza the persona refers to the painful suffering of all the present generations of Black people, as represented by the "brothers and sisters" (Angelou, 1994, p. 155) of the Black community. Black people are engaged in tedious work which requires not only physical strength, but also a high level of endurance and patience due to its stress, high risks and huge responsibilities. Such a tedious work represents the daily suffering and misery of the Black community in which all Black people are involved whether males or females. Despite their daily work challenges and the poor conditions of their workplaces, Black people still persist and never complain about the difficult nature of their labor. They feel committed to their work regardless of being tough or risky. Work, for the Black, adds to their sense of pride and contributes much to their Black identities. This is why they are ethically committed to continue working till death. What is infuriating for them, however, is to exploit them for the benefit of the White. This unfair exploitation surely drives them mad. Working with gaining no benefits resembles, for them, the life of servility that was imposed on their ancestors. It is intolerable, for the Black, to conform to such an oppressive system which denies them equal rights with the White in the workplace.

The penultimate stanza presents the persona's collective perspective about Black people's working problems and challenges. Here, a new figure is introduced for the first time in the poem. This is the figure of the listeners or the addressees to whom the poem's persona is conveying directly her own view in regard to the crucial situation of the working people of the black color. The persona is addressing them by using the second-person object pronoun 'you'. The addressees in this stanza and throughout the lines are the Black people themselves who act as the persona's audience. This is further reinforced by the poet's repetition of the word 'let's' which refers to the poet's calling of her Black fellows to join her in a collective action to stop their exploitation and oppression.

The persona describes her own personal perspective as a 'golden rule' (Angelou, 1994, p. 156) which indicates her dedication and decisiveness in dealing with this crucial issue. She also shows her steadfastness in advocating the rights of Black people. The persona reveals clearly the main principle according to which all Black Americans are ready to work. It is the principle of humane treatment and respectfulness. Black people have no tendency to be any more subjugated and dominated by the White. They are no longer willing to work nonstop as machines. They will not accept to work only for the benefit of the White community any longer. This work principle is summarized in the persona's metaphoric reference to the word 'mule' through which the persona negates and disapproves Black people's comparison to mules. Mules are animals which are known for their nonstop hard working for the benefit of their owners. They are also known for showing more patience and less obstinacy in carrying out their fulfilled tasks than other animals. The persona, in this sense, makes it clear that Black people have lost their patience and endurance regarding White Americans' injustice and inequalities. They reject their inhumane treatment in the manner of treating slaves or mules. They, thus, become more resilient and determined in breaking the shackles of their humiliation, enslavement and exploitation.

## 2) Racialized Marginalization

Throughout her poetry, Maya Angelou writes about the marginalization of African-American people within the American society. In such a racially discriminating society, the supremacy goes to the White who are the superior race. In contrast, Black people are inferior, devalued and underprivileged. Their inferiority is mainly caused by their black skin. This simply justifies why they are marginalized. Accordingly, they are denied all the life facilities available for the White including services and social activities. They are also denied high positions in the workplace. They are excluded from social and political participation. Unlike their White counterparts, Black people lack social recognition. They are not allowed to seek their rights of making decisions or asserting their identities. In such poems as "Equality," "Harlem Hopscotch" and "No No No No," Maya Angelou captures the marginalization and social exclusion of Black people in American community.

The marginalization of African-Americans is aptly illustrated in "Equality". The poem implicitly strikes a contrast between the superior, privileged White Americans and the inferior, underprivileged Black Americans. The White dominate the social and political scenes, have full power and enjoy all life facilities, whereas the Black are trapped in the vicious circle of oppression and injustice. They live in full deprivation and agony since their rights are entirely unrecognized by the White. Consequently, they lack power, self-respect, equality and freedom. Angelou's view of equality exactly corresponds to Young's (1990, p. 173) definition of the term. Equality, as defined by Young (1990, p. 173), refers to the inclusion and full involvement of all people in social institutions and the availability of equal opportunities for all to reach self-fulfillment. Angelou's poem, in this sense, exposes the exclusion of African-Americans from active engagement in their society and the loss of their right for living a respectful life of dignity.

The poem, throughout its nine stanzas, captures a woman-speaker who collectively represents the Black people and is engaged

in an argument with the White who dominate the entire society and disregards the presence of the Black and ignore their rights:

You declare you see me dimly  
through a glass which will not shine  
though I stand before you boldly (Angelou, 1994, p. 232).

The first stanza introduces a confrontation scene between the woman-speaker who uses the first-person pronouns 'I' 'my' and 'me' on the one hand and the White society, on the other hand, which plays the role of a passive listener throughout the poem. In this confrontation scene, the woman-speaker is talking confidently and defiantly in order to explain why the Black are oppressed and to be convincing in demanding freedom and equality. She accuses the White of their ignorance of the presence of the Black who live with them side by side in the same community. The devastating effect of this is the marginalization and entire exclusion of Black people in a degrading manner. The speaker uses here an effective metaphor to render their exclusion. She compares Black people, including herself, to a dimmed glass through which the White try to look but see nothing. The implication of such a revealing metaphor is that Black people remain invisible and their presence is not recognized.

The woman-speaker, as representative of all the Black, however, attempts to ensure their presence in the social scene and accuses the White of their ill-intention in disregarding their presence. The poem's speaker, as Sih (2020, p. 29) rightly remarks, is not merely concerned with Black people's struggle for achieving equality with the White but she is also concerned with how they seek recognition in all spheres of life in an attempt to get rid of their exclusion. The description of Black people, through the figure of the speaker, as standing "boldly, trim in rank and marking time" (Angelou, 1994, p. 232) refers to Black Americans' eligibility to be equal partners with their White counterparts. Nonetheless, they are still ignored and inferiorized.

In the second stanza, the speaker continues her accusation of the White. Here, the White are accused of having the full power to dominate, manipulate and enslave the Black. The verb 'own'

suggests this dehumanizing sense of enslavement and degradation. White Americans' racial discrimination is responsible for the abusive and inhumane treatment of the Black. Part of this inhumane treatment is using a segregation policy through which Black people are isolated and left at a distance away from the White community. This is why they are not allowed to speak and utter their demands, and when they speak, they are not heard. The White are carless about their demands which, through uttered loudly, reach White people's ears as mere whispers. This obviously signifies Black people's lack of power to make a real change and realize their freedom. Though compared to drums, Black people's voices are so weak and vulnerable. Their perseverance and persistence, however, never change while they strive to achieve their collective aim which is equality. The word 'drum', as Sidiq and Majeed (2022, p. 217) argue, symbolizes the speaker's words that are purposefully intended to convey Black Americans' emotional need for equality as they are living in a racially discriminating society. Equality is regarded here as the only solution to all the suffering and pains experienced by the Black. Black people's vital necessity and urgent need for equality is not only rendered in the title but also by the reiteration of the words "Equality, and I will be free" (Angelou, 1994, p. 232) six times throughout the lines. These words are written in the form of a repeated definitive statement which stands alone in a separate stanza to serve as a refrain after each two stanzas. In this statement, freedom is considered to be a logical outcome of equality. This means that whenever Black Americans enjoy equal rights with the White, they, then, will be free and will not feel oppressed or marginalized any longer.

The fourth stanza focuses on the speaker's accusation of the White of intentionally inferiorizing the Black. They always regard the Black as sexual objects rather than human beings. They also look at Black women as being immoral and vulnerable to the sexuality of men. The woman-speaker tries to justify this disgusting image of Black woman by describing her as a shadow" (Angelou, 1994, p. 232) to the White. The word 'shadow' places both Black men and



women at the lowest rank in society. What is painful about the horrible reality Black people experience is the fact that the woman-speaker does not negate or disapprove her image as an immoral prostitute who flies "from man to man" (Angelou, 1994, p. 232). It is their miserable life which drives Black women to accept such humility and degradation. Hence, the speaker justifies why they are vulnerable and promiscuous. Her justification is based on the undeniable fact of their marginalization and oppression. Accordingly, they are totally deprived of their humanity and are only regarded in sexual terms. They are also denied their rights of education, equal job opportunities and other life facilities. Their crucial problem here is that the White are not aware of Black deprivation, and do not realize their suffering and distress.

In the fifth stanza, the woman-speaker stops her accusation and, instead, is engaged in a short scene of recollection in which she recalls Black Americans' history of enslavement. The speaker replaces the pronoun 'I', which is used in the previous stanzas, with the collective pronoun 'we'. This refers to the collective history of suffering. It is significant here to use the present perfect tense "have lived" (Angelou, 1994, p. 232) which signifies the idea that the present generation of Black people still experience the same suffering and pains faced by their ancestors formerly. Because they suffer the inequalities of the White, they realize the similarity between their situation and that of their ancestors who were trapped in slavery. This past history of slavery is described as "shameful" (Angelou, 1994, p. 232). Black people recognize the dishonorable reality of their past history but they feel morally committed to change this horrible reality by trying to break the shackles of enslavement and oppression and attain freedom. The speaker compares their own struggle to achieve freedom to soldiers marching towards a battlefield. This metaphor suggests Black people's earnestness and persistence in calling for equality. In contrast, the White are described as oblivious to their demands and as contented with their privileges and superiority.

The seventh stanza, therefore, opens with the woman-speaker addressing White Americans in a commanding tone. The speaker here neither implores nor asks for help. Rather, she appears to present her argument forcefully and confidently. She asks the White to stop being blind to the miseries of Black people and stop being deaf to Black people's demands of equality and freedom. She metaphorically compares the White, in their indifference to the rights of Black people, to a person who is putting blinders on his eyes and padding in his ears. The speaker then asks the White to confess and admit their full awareness of Black people's plight. By employing the auditory image of crying, and the visual image of shedding tears, the speaker drives home the painful suffering of Black Americans while living in deprivation.

In the penultimate stanza, the woman-speaker shows Black Americans' enthusiastic attitude and their insistence on being socially recognized by their White oppressors. Their enthusiasm is reflected in her voice which is "so compelling" (Angelou, 1994, p. 233) and in her blood which is throbbing in her veins. She compares her heartbeat to the loud beating of drums which suggests a sense of powerfulness and unwavering persistence.

The poem's message is aptly conveyed through the use of juxtaposition. The main message is to strive for equality between the inferior Black and the superior White. In order to convey this message, the poet creates an ironic contrast of attitudes between the Black and the White. Then the poet juxtaposes the two contrasted attitudes. Accordingly, the poem foregrounds the White's ability to 'declare', 'own' and 'announce' their supremacy. It ironically reflects their inability to 'hear, and 'see' the marginalized other or confess, and 'admit' their racist oppressive policies. In contrast, the Black woman-speaker refers to herself saying "I stand," "I keep on marching" and "I will be free" (Angelou, 1994, p. 232). This juxtaposition serves to expose the White's aggressive and inhumane treatment of their Black counterparts by excluding them from social participation and denying their right of living respectfully. In contrast, the poet, through his technique of juxtaposition, manages

to show Black people's enduring persistence, the powerfulness of their moral position and the eligibility of their demands of social, political and economic equality with the White.

In "Harlem Hopscotch" Angelou, through the metaphorical depiction of a children's game, gives an insightful overview of the struggling life of African-Americans under a racist system. She foregrounds the poverty and adversity faced by the Harlem Black American community and obviously shows how the survival of the Black in such a community is challenging and, thus, necessitates the ability to endure economic oppression, marginalization and subjugation. By viewing the desperate reality of Black people's life in a racist community in terms of a children's game, Angelou, as Jayanti and Mustofa (2020, p. 26) argue, attempts to reflect the silliness and absurdity of the restrictions and rules of racial segregation and marginalization that are imposed on Black people. Such oppressive restrictions and rules of an unjust White-dominated society definitely account for the pathetic life of Black Americans who live in total deprivation.

The title "Harlem Hopscotch" provides the main setting where the game of hopscotch is played. It is in Harlem, an impoverished New York neighborhood in Manhattan where a large number of Black Americans moved after the Civil War and have lived in poverty, inequity and segregation since then as a result of the white's racial discrimination. In Harlem community, Black people are not only segregated but also pauperized, unemployed and deprived of good education, health care and all the other privileges that are allocated for the White. In such a racist, materialistic community, selfishness is always the norm. Each person cares only for himself and there is hardly any social solidarity. The Harlem setting, in this sense, becomes a symbol of racial oppression, marginalization and discrimination. The poem's title also introduces the game of hopscotch which is simply a game played by children. Yet, the poem's main focus is not merely on a game played by the Black children of Harlem. Rather, the game itself is symbolic of how Black Americans lead a restricted, miserable life not only in Harlem

but throughout the United States where they remain entrapped in segregation and severely suffer poverty and marginalization.

The poem is rendered from the perspective of an unidentified speaker. Apparently, this speaker is a Black person who is a resident of Harlem and who is familiar with its social customs and cultural activities including children's games. Here the speaker plays the role of a young Black child's instructor who is experienced enough to show him how to perform well in the game of hopscotch and to urge him to endure till the end of the game. The speaker, thus, addresses this Black child throughout the poem giving him guidance and, at the same time, shedding light on the miserable realities of Black people who suffer the oppression of a racist society.

One foot down, then hop! It's hot.

Good things for the ones that' got

Another jump, now to the left (Angelou, 1994, p. 51).

In these opening lines of the first stanza, the unnamed speaker gives a description of the hopscotch game and explains its rules. It is a game of jumping and hopping across squares with putting only one foot on the ground. The player who is able to move and jump quickly without stepping over a line will surely get "good things"(Angelou, 1994, p. 51). This implies that people who have the required determination, power and freedom will achieve material success. This definitely alludes to White Americans who enjoy freedom, wealth and all life facilities. They are contrasted to Black people whose actions are restricted and dictated by laws of segregation represented by the dividing lines in the game. The inevitable result is that they are living in poverty and misery.

In the second stanza, the speaker gives more instructions to the Black child on how to play the hopscotch game. It is unfair for Black players to have specific tough rules set for them to play the game. According to these unjust rules, Black players have to carry on moving with one foot only on the ground. They should try hard to achieve this. But if it occurs that they get tired and mistakenly put both feet on the ground, they surely will lose the game. This challenging situation in the game corresponds to Black people's

situation when they have no food available and no money to pay the rent. Even job opportunities are rarely available to them. They helplessly have nothing to do but endure their suffering in order to survive.

In the third stanza, the speaker instructs the child on the possibility of ending the game. Here, the Black child will be out of the game if he cannot continue jumping and twisting to the end of the game. It is really difficult for him to hold one foot into the air while jumping over three squares, twisting and then moving suddenly. Such challenging movements are certainly beyond the child's capacity. This exactly corresponds to the situation of a Black person who is destined to live in an unbearable world of White oppression. In the final couplet, the speaker distinctly challenges other people to whom he refers with the pronoun 'they'. These people think of him as a failure since he refuses to follow the restricting rules imposed on him and chooses, according to his own free will, a different path. He, however, has a different view of himself by regarding himself as successful. This implies that Black people can possibly have freedom of choice, self-confidence and self-respect once they are able to reject the racism of a society governed by agonizing rules and irritating systems. In other words, Black people can live freely away from the shackles of racial discrimination and assert their autonomous identity once they are able to resist the unjust regulations of a racist social system which is designed to oppress and marginalize them for the benefit of their White counterparts.

Throughout the poem, the game of hopscotch is used as an extended metaphor for the struggles, challenges and hardships of life in a racist community. Angelou, as Faisal et al. (2023, p. 552) point out, employs the hopscotch game metaphorically to impart the sense of oppression as a result of racial discrimination. Accordingly, the actions, skills and experience of Black people in the racist Harlem community are compared to the skills and movements of players in a hopscotch game. Similarly, the racist restriction and unendurable regulations which are imposed on Black people in addition to the

boundaries which they are not allowed to transgress are compared to the game instructions. These instructions are difficult to follow due to the dividing lines between each of the game's squares. These lines are challenging in the sense that the players are not allowed to step over them or place their feet outside specific squares. Likewise, Black people's struggling and enduring persistence for the sake of survival in their merciless society are compared to the challenging actions of jumping, hopping, twisting and jerking which are involved in the game. Significantly, all such comparisons symbolically turn the game of hopscotch from a common children's game to a restricted way of life for all Black Americans.

What is particularly distinctive about the poem is the fact that it strikes a sharp contrast between the racist White people of the Harlem community and their Black counterparts. White people are portrayed as self-sufficient, wealthy and powerful in the sense that they are able to pay the rent, find appropriate jobs and live safely. Their Black counterparts, on the other hand, are poor, helpless and lack self-fulfillment and power. They also lack money, job opportunities and safety. As such, Black people, just like the Black child who is instructed on how to play the hopscotch game, have to go on moving, working and struggling daily in order to survive in a White-dominated society. These are simply the dictates of a racist White community. Consequently, Black people find themselves entrapped in the injustice and inequalities of such a community and, thus, become marginalized.

An example of Angelou's protest poems in which she rejects and condemns White Americans' racist policies and ethnically-based prejudice against African-Americans is her ten-stanza poem entitled "No No No No". the poem employs four different speakers: an unidentified third-person speaker, crying babies, a Black woman and a White woman. Through the voices of these four speakers, the poet exposes and strongly condemns the aggressiveness, arrogance and racial discrimination of the White American society against African-Americans. The poet criticizes the American legal system which tolerates injustice, inequality and marginalization. She also targets

the various social institutions, including the American family and the religious institution represented by the church's priests and saints for their callousness, hypocrisy and indifference to the suffering and misery of Black marginals.

No

The gap-legg'd whore

.....

... turns her pigeon-shit back to me (Angelou, 1994, p. 42).

In these lines of the second stanza, the speaker, who is a Black woman, presents a satiric commentary on the idea of freedom in the United States. This alleged freedom is hinted at through the reference to the Statue of Liberty which is satirically described as "a gap-legg'd whore" (Angelou, 1994, p. 42). Such satirical description evokes a sense of dishonesty, immorality and vulnerability that prevail and dominate the White American community. Accordingly, the Black woman exposes White Americans' inequalities and injustices that are committed under the hypocritical guise of freedom. Most significantly, she alludes to the White people of the eastern colonies which were known for enslaving the Black and torturing them. She, thus, exposes American's hypocrisy in giving all privileges and opportunities to the White European immigrants while exploiting and marginalizing Black people whose ancestors worked as slaves and contributed much for the economic progress and prosperity of the country in all aspects of life.

A White woman-speaker is introduced in the third stanza. She refutes the accusation that Black people are excluded and marginalized due to White racist oppression, apathy and callousness. Instead of admitting White Americans' responsibility for Black people's miseries, the White speaker puts the blame on Black people themselves. She blames them for their roughness, meanness and misconduct. Her accusation of the Black, however, reflects her triviality in contrast to the Black woman-speaker of the previous stanza who shows moral earnestness and compelling reasoning in addition to a bitter sense of grief and distress. Furthermore, the White woman-speaker shows her hypocrisy by pretending to be

deeply concerned about the plight of Black people while, in reality, she feels delighted and grateful that she herself is not Black. She reveals her aggressiveness and insulting attitude when she announces explicitly her hatred of all people of black color. In addition, she discloses her inner feelings of disgust and enmity towards the Black race. This is reflected in her offensive language which includes references to Black women as "mammies" and their children as "pickaninnies" (Angelou, 1994, p. 43). Her disgust and antagonism is also reflected in the way she tries to inferiorize and degrade Black women by regarding them not as respectable human beings but as despicable stealers whose misconduct drives them to steal from the kitchen of their White landladies.

The Black woman is re-introduced as the speaker in the fourth stanza. Here she criticizes the White priests and saints for their part in the oppression and degradation of Black people. The priests are enjoying the luxuries of life. In a visual image, they are vividly portrayed as wearing red shoes and as being carried on palanquins. This image is juxtaposed with an evocative image which captures Black children who are walking bare-footed in the country. This compelling juxtaposition serves to show how the White priests are living extravagantly and enjoying religious authority. They also turn out to be hypocrites in their apparent concern about the survival of the homeless, the helpless and the needy while they are indifferent and irresponsible to the suffering and poverty of Black people who cannot afford to buy shoes for their miserable children. The Black speaker also describes the ghettos where entire Black families live pathetically and suffer the hardships of life. Moreover, the Black speaker attacks the White saints who remain indifferently passive towards the exclusion of Black people from social life. She criticizes them harshly particularly because they are showing off hypocritically due to their claim of being moral and flawless.

The traditional image of sincere and benevolent saints who offer help to the poor and the needy is ironically contrasted here with the image of those hypocritical saints who are indifferently gazing at the starving mothers without offering them a helping hand. What is



more pathetic here is that these mothers are depicted as kneeling and searching for food through waste to offer their starving children. The woman-speaker, thus, sends an implicit message of protest to such saints to stop being hypocrite and give assistance to the distressed Black people by defending their right of living respectfully. More generally, the lines of the fourth stanza reflect the poet's emphasis on the urgent need to put an end to the oppression of Black people, recognize their humanity and accept them as an essential part of the American community.

In the fifth stanza, the Black speaker expresses her pessimistic realization that White Americans' injustices and exclusion practices are hopelessly expected to go on endlessly and that there is no real possibility for the Black to find a way out of their plight. The speaker's pessimism and hopelessness are indicated in the verb "have waited" (Angelou, 1994, p. 43). She explains that Black people have endured for so long and submissively accepted their degradation. Black women, in particular, have accepted to be exploited by working for the White families as maids, housekeepers and farm workers. The lines of the fifth stanza describe the visual images of those oppressed women who are living and working in the back porches, kitchens and fields of their White landlords. Despite all such labor and physical and emotional sacrifices, Black people are entirely rejected and excluded from the society of privileged White Americans. They are denied equal opportunities with their White counterparts and are, thus, suffering painfully the dreadful impacts of racial segregation. They are, for instance, not allowed to use the spaces allocated for White people in such basic utilities as buses, cafes and restaurants. Hence, there is a real necessity, as the poem's speaker makes it clear, for changing this oppressive system of racial segregation and White domination.

### **3) African-American Powerlessness**

The segregation and entire exclusion which African-Americans experience on a daily basis inspire Maya Angelou to write poems about their helplessness and powerlessness in the American community. Angelou's poems shed light on how Black people lack

autonomy and the ability to control their own life. They lack full participation in the American society. They are also denied their rights of living freely as the White or developing their own skills and talents. They have no active role to play in political life and they are forced to live in segregation by having their own schools and hospitals and by crowding into poor ghettos. Moreover, they are not allowed to be engaged in social life together with the White. Rather, they suffer the agony of deprivation, poor education, unemployment and poor housing. As a result, they inevitably lose self-confidence, self-respect, and the sense of pride in their own identities as Black American citizens. Angelou manages to convey this negative idea of African-Americans' powerlessness in a number of poems including "Caged Bird," "Million Man March" and "Song for the Old Ones."

In "Caged Bird," a six-stanza poem written in free verse, Angelou introduces two contrasting birds: one is free while the other is caged. The free bird is symbolic of the powerful White Americans who enjoy the luxurious life of freedom since they are superior, whereas the caged bird stands for the powerless Black Americans who experience the confinement of racism and oppression. Throughout the lines, the poet juxtaposes the actions and feelings of the free bird with those of the caged bird.

The first stanza describes how the free bird flies freely and confidently and how it feels joyful and carefree.

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind

.....

and dares to claim the sky (Angelou, 1994, p. 194).

These opening lines focus on the movements of the free bird. The free bird is joyfully flying wherever it desires. It is entirely carefree as it is leaping, floating and dipping his wings in the rays of the sun. The detailed description of the free bird's actions is very much revealing, particularly its leaping on the back of the wind. This signifies the power of the free bird which makes it in full control of the wind by directing it wherever it wants. The bird's physical

strength, confidence and powerfulness are shown not only by the leaping movement, but also by the unrestrained action of floating aimlessly which continues till the end of the current in order to get full satisfaction. They are also indicated by the bird's daring to claim the ownership of the sky as its own home which signifies absolute power and domination over something it is not entitled to own. All these powerful actions of the free bird are accompanied by the feelings of ecstasy and joy. Such positive feelings are represented by the natural beauty of the scene as indicated in the orange color of the sun rays. This helps to reinforce the calm, carefree atmosphere of freedom and luxury.

The second stanza, in contrast, focuses on the situation of the captive bird:

The first line of the second stanza starts with the word "but" (Angelou, 1994, p. 194) to emphasize the idea of contrast between the free bird and the caged bird. The stanza as a whole focuses on the description of the restricted movements of the caged bird. This captive bird can do nothing more than stalking down his cage. This reveals the sense of limitation and imprisonment. What reinforces this negative sense of limitation is the description of the bird's cage as being 'narrow' which implies that there is not enough space for the bird to move within the cage. The helpless bird, thus, remains in full captivity without any glimpse of freedom. To add to the deplorable situation of the captive bird, the poet describes its inability to see through the bars of the cage. This evokes the sense of segregation and isolation from the world outside the cage. The captive bird's world is only the cage which represents the life of powerlessness and lack of freedom. To emphasize the bird's captivity and confinement, its wings are described as being cut and its feet as being tied. This skillfully illustrates its lack of autonomy.

The bird, in this sense loses full control not only of its physical body and its physical movements but its emotional sense of power as well. This is why it is described as having "bars of rage" (Angelou, 1994, p. 194) which suggests the negative feelings of anger and frustration. The only achievement that is attributed to the caged bird

is its ability to express dissatisfaction and resentment as shown in opening its throat in order to sing. Singing here is not an act of cheerfulness and joy. Rather, it is a desperate cry to reveal a sense of indignation and protest against the injustice committed by the bird's oppressors.

The caged bird's manner of singing reveals the sense of fear and hesitation as shown in "fearful trill" (Angelou, 1994, p. 194). It is probably fear of the possible consequences of protest and revolt against oppression and domination. Despite the bird's fear, it still continues to sing. The bird's signing refers to the hope of having things that have never been experienced before. It also refers to longing for something which is impossible to realize. It is the life of freedom and equality that the caged bird is aspiring to. Hence, its singing, or rather shouting, travels far till it reaches "the distant hill" (Angelou, 1994, p. 194) which indicates the urgent need for breaking away from its captivity and from the grip of its oppressors. A fearful atmosphere of hesitation, loss and confusion dominates the scene. This negative atmosphere aptly suits the lack of self-confidence in addition to the attitude of submissiveness and powerlessness.

In the fourth stanza, the poet describes once more the luxurious life of the free bird. A list of more benefits is given to add to the luxurious life of the carefree bird. This list includes the bird's sense of satisfaction while enjoying the breeze and the soft winds that pass through the forest of trees. The bird enjoys the pleasures of this atmosphere of intimacy and warmth. The list of privileges also includes the delicious meal of fat worms." (Angelou, 1994, p. 194). These worms are placed on the green lawn at dawn waiting for the free bird to come and devour them. What is distinctive about this spectacular list of benefits enjoyed by the free bird is the fact that it includes different natural elements which certainly provide sources of emotional contentment and cheerfulness represented by the breeze, winds and trees, on one hand, and physical nourishment represented by the 'fat worms' on the other hand. Consequently, the free bird feels the unrestrained magnificence of emotional and

physical freedom. It, thus, feels superior and has the confidence and power to claim ownership of the sky.

Inversely, the fifth stanza captures the powerlessness of the captive bird whose hopes for freedom are frustrated. These hopes are now transformed into dreams which are found to be unreachable and, thus, finally end in vain. The caged bird stands helplessly and has nothing more to produce than shouting and screaming uselessly. To emphasize the bird's powerlessness, the poet describes the bird itself as a shadow which lacks the power to determine its own destiny. Moreover, its state of powerlessness becomes a nightmare.

What adds to the deplorable situation of the bird's powerlessness is reiterating the visual image of having its wings cut and feet tied. Thus, this captive bird is capable of doing nothing more than protesting and showing indignation by opening its throat and trying to sing desperately. The last stanza, which is a repetition of the third stanza, sheds light on the trapped bird's desire for living freely with no confinement and the need for enjoying equal rights like other creatures. This justifies why the bird is still singing of freedom. It is quite logical that the caged bird, due to being powerless, feels fear and hesitation of expressing its need for freedom. Yet, it never gives up singing. Although freedom is an essential quality that is supposed to be universally and naturally acquired by any living creature, the trapped bird has not experienced it before. Thus, freedom is something that remains unknown to this captive bird. The captive bird, in this sense, though powerless, attempts through singing to get what is supposed to be naturally acquired.

The poem, in the final analysis, serves as an allegory which symbolically presents the horrible reality of the African-Americans' situation within the racist White-dominated community. The free bird metaphorically represents White Americans who are more powerful, more privileged and superior. They, thus, are the dominant race. In contrast, the caged bird stands for the African-Americans who are powerless, helpless and downtrodden. They, thus, remain submissive, dominated and segregated through the White community's racist, oppressive practices. The poem's

emphasis on this stark contrast between White Americans' free life and Black people's captivity, as embodied by the contrast between a free bird and a caged bird, is strongly related to the idea of powerfulness. Freedom, in this sense, implies power, whereas captivity is undoubtedly associated with powerlessness.

Unlike their White American counterparts, Black Americans are denied their freedom and suffer the devastating impact of racial discrimination socially, culturally, economically and politically. They are denied equality, justice as well as their right of having all life facilities. They are also dehumanized since their freedom is no longer acquired. They, in consequence, have to endure deprivation and lack of recognition. What adds to their oppression is the fact that they themselves facilitate their own suppression by remaining passive, powerless and submissive. This is indicated in the choice of such passive verb constructions associated with the caged bird as "are clipped" and "are tired" (Angelou, 1994, p. 194). Hence, the poet, in the concluding lines, sends an indirect message to Black people motivating them to defy the oppression of White American society, defend their equal rights with the White and claim their own freedom with dignity and self-confidence.

Moreover, the poem embarks on the physical and emotional impact of powerlessness and lack of autonomy on the downtrodden Black people in the American community. The caged bird of Angelou's poem, as Gyeltshen (2022, p. 3) points out, is symbolic of Black Americans' psychological isolation and their sense of estrangement which are an expected outcome of racial discrimination in the United States. Black Americans are both physically and emotionally confined within a segregated society as metaphorically represented by the confinement of the bird inside the cage. White people attempt by all means to show them as an inferior race who has limited capabilities. This is strategically meant to justify their segregation policies, their domination, hatred and inhumane treatment of Black people. White Americans' subjugation of Black people and the violation of their rights are represented in the poem by the free bird's leaping and daring to claim the universe.

Furthermore, Black Americans are referred to as 'fat worms' which implies their inferiority and helplessness. They are also alienated and deprived like the trapped bird whose wings are removed and whose feet are tied. Yet, Black Americans are totally dissatisfied with their injustice and oppression and they still yearn for freedom to regain their powerfulness.

In "Million Man March" Angelou, likewise, presents a detailed description of the pains and suffering experienced by the Black American people as a result of their life of suppression, powerlessness and servility. The poem, as Wedin (2011, p. 60) points out, is originally part of Angelou's political speech delivered to a large gathering of African American protesters who were demonstrating in Washington, D.C., in 1995. This large demonstration is historically known as the 'Million Man March'. Its main aim is to advocate the rights of Black Americans and call for justice and equality. In her poem, Angelou not only addresses the Black protesters but all the African-American community as well. Throughout the lines, the poet depicts how Black Americans are still living the life of servitude and adversity even after the abolition of slavery. She also embarks on the negative impact of such enslavement on the poor and helpless Black people who have endured abuse and humiliation both physically and psychologically. The poet also urges the people of her Black race to reject this life of enslavement and oppression. She reveals her feelings of anger and frustration for the inhumane treatment Black people receive for nothing but the color of their skin.

In the opening lines, the speaker describes how Black people are suffering severely the consequences of racial discrimination:

The night has been long,  
The wound has been deep,

.....

And the walls have been steep (Angelou, 2003, Jan. 3, lines 1-4).

In these lines, Black Americans are depicted as experiencing endless miseries. Their life of drudgery is imposed upon them by the various

social institutions of White American community which shows no respect or even recognition to them. Rather, they are regarded as powerless and inferior. They are, thus, segregated and discarded. Such racist and oppressive treatment of Black people at the hands of their White counterparts is metaphorically compared to digging a hole in which all Black Americans fall. The hole is described as dark and its walls as steep. This denotes that it is really difficult, if not impossible, to get out of the hole. Hence, Black people are referred to as helpless victims who desperately strive to survive and escape the plight of their servitude. This is why their victimization is compared to a deep wound and their miserable life is compared to a long night. What is particularly revealing here is the use of the present perfect tense in describing the horrible reality of the Black race. This implies that the Black race has experienced such a horrible reality since the earlier generation of Black slaves in the United States. It also implies that the present generation of Black Americans is still suffering with no real change in their life of enslavement.

In the second stanza, the speaker recalls the miserable past life of slavery experienced and endured by the Black American slaves. The verb tense shifts to past simple in passive to highlight the sense of utter helplessness and powerlessness of these Black slaves. The persona, by using the first-person subject pronoun 'I', introduces herself directly in this stanza as a Black female who is sharing the suffering of the men. Here she is addressing them directly by using the second-person subject pronoun 'you'. The purpose of addressing those Black slaves directly is to expose their intolerable life of servility. She refers to an unidentified location by using the expression "under a blue sky on a distant beach" (Angelou, 2003, Jan. 3, line 5). This implies that they are taken as slaves everywhere. The persona's actions and the actions of the Black men are used in the passive. For instance, the persona was dragged by her braids. The Black men's hands were tied and their mouths were shut. All such passive actions signify how much these Black slaves, both men and women, are abused and tortured in a savage and dehumanizing manner. They are enslaved and dominated in such a way that all



they can do is to endure their suffering in silence. Their sense of impotence and powerlessness is so complete that they remain helpless and their freedom is certainly beyond their reach. Their inferiority due to their black skin, in this sense, is regarded as "a badge of shame" (Angelou, 2003, Jan. 3, line 11) that they have worn since the time of their enslavement. The wretchedness of Black people's life is exactly what is meant by the deep wound referred to earlier in the opening lines and mentioned once again in the third stanza.

A new shift of tone in the opening of the fourth stanza is marked by the use of 'but.' Here, the tone changes from being helpless and desperate to a hopeful and challenging tone. Such a challenging tone is created by the voices of the old Black people who have endured all the hardships of servitude in the hope of getting liberated. Those old slaves show strong enthusiasm toward the freedom of Black Americans. Their enthusiasm is quite evident in their profound words, influential speeches, passionate language and long experience of hard labor throughout the years. The persona is identifying with Black people by using the objective pronoun 'us'. She conveys what those old men recommend to help all Black people find a way to break the fetters of White domination. The best way they recommend is the solidarity and collective unity of all Black Americans. They need to have more confidence in themselves to be sure that their ancestors have repeatedly paid the price of their freedom with their enslavement, labor and sacrifice.

The main plight of Black Americans here is the fact that they lack trust in their capabilities. They lack the ability to express their own perspective. They are not confident enough to strive for their rights, or to take collective decisions in vital issues that concern their own life. In short, they, as Radhi and Abed (2016, p. 73) argue, have a shared sense of submissiveness and humiliation. Their impotence, thus, is evidently reflected in their lack of social respectability and their inferiority. These are the deep wounds that leave those Black people invisible and discarded. This is why their life of servitude is compared to dark, long nights and their

impotence is compared to high, steep walls and barriers that cannot be surpassed. These metaphors are closely connected to a crucial weakness in Black personality, namely powerlessness.

In the sixth stanza, the poet elaborates more on the painful experiences of Black Americans who have suffered and still endure the humiliating life under the grip of the White. These bitter experiences are compared to hells to show how much the Black have been tortured and lived in agony. Now they are supposed to be more resilient in resisting injustice. Their resilience is conveyed through the reference to "This morning" (Angelou, 2003, Jan. 3, line 32) which symbolizes hope, optimism and enthusiasm. It is true that they are living in anguish but they can soon regain their powerfulness once they stand together and confront their White oppressors. The only possible way to stand on equal footing with the White is to have mutual tolerance, honesty, care and love with their Black fellows, to stop arrogance and recognize their weakness but not to feel traumatic about their painful past. It is only in this sense that the Black really deserve the persona's description of them as a persistent people who have one heart and a collective spiritual power and who are able to release themselves from the shackles of White servility.

Similarly, Angelou's poem entitled "Song for the Old Ones," exposes the powerlessness of African-American ancestors. It depicts their distress and bitterness which they have experienced due to their lifelong working as slaves and due to the fact that they are entirely overwhelmed by the power of the White masters. Nonetheless, the poem presents a new insight into the emotions and mentality of those old slaves and how they have endured their servility. This is furnished by creating a scene in which the poem's person is introduced as a female Black woman who is listening attentively to a group of old men of her race talking about their slavery experience and the hardships they have faced in their youth. The persona is also observing them carefully and highly appreciates their perseverance.

The first two stanzas shed light on the physical impact of slavery on the old men:

My Fathers sit on benches

.....

They nod like broken candles

all waxed and burnt profound (Angelou, 1994, p. 108).

The poem's persona is involved into the scene from the very beginning. This reveals that all Black Americans have one common destiny and that all are deeply concerned about their plight. The old men are introduced as 'Fathers'. This reveals an intimate, close relationship between the younger and the older generations of Black people. Their community is obviously a closely-knit community. The physical description of these old men reveals that their bodies are worn out after long years of slavery. Just sitting on wooden benches with their long tough planks badly affects their flesh and leaves deep, dark marks on their bodies. This simply implies that their old bodies are withered and become so weak as a result of the hard labor they experienced in their youth. It is also the result of torture and punishment received at the hands of their White masters who used wood planks in beating them. That is why their wounds are deep, dark and marked with scars. Consequently, the old men are now wearied and exhausted. They are compared to broken candles which are totally consumed. Like the broken candles, the old men exerted their utmost efforts in the service of their White masters until their energy was consumed and their bodies were exhausted by their hard work under the scorching sun. Their own words, when they comment on their hard labor, are really revealing. They ascribe the economic progress and huge achievements in all fields of American life to their great efforts and sacrifice and to their submissive role as slaves. They regard their submissiveness as some kind of understanding and wisdom without which they would not be still alive.

In the third stanza, the speaker focuses on the agony and torture of those old slaves. Their innocent, wrinkled faces are highly expressive. By just looking them in the face the speaker easily identifies the methods and tools used in torturing those old victims. She describes first how they are used as slaves. They are captured by

White slavers and are sold at auctions. Once they become slaves, they are now powerless and ready to receive orders from their masters, and ready to be punished and humiliated. Through a number of visual images, the persona enumerates the tools used in their physical punishment. They are chained together by using long, iron chains and are flogged by a whip and lash. Another type of unmerciful punishment is by confining these slaves in stocks.

The revelation of the inevitable reality of the old slaves comes as a real shock to the persona. Their own judgment of the issue of slavery is quite unexpected by the persona. She gets perplexed and at a loss, because they confess their own powerlessness, and submission. Moreover, they regard their submissive personalities as a great blessing which serves to make large economic changes and improvement in the United States. They, thus, attempt to justify their powerlessness and interpret it in positive terms. Hence, the persona highly appreciates their tactics and commends their shrewdness. She also admires the way they make tricks by pretending to be humble and meek slaves whose features give a false impression of their silliness and simplicity. Part of their tactics is concealing their real emotions of sadness and frustration for the harsh life of deprivation and suppression imposed on them. They, thus, laugh instead of crying and sing instead of screaming. This indicates that they have creative talents and capabilities. The point here is that those experienced slaves are keen on feigning power and strong will instead of appearing as broken and defeated in the eyes of their White oppressors. But the fact remains that they are actually living in misery and distress due to their powerlessness and helplessness. This is clearly shown in the actions describing their movements such as "shuffled" and "stepped" in addition to the type of music they prefer to write and sing which reveals their sadness, namely "the blues" (Angelou, 1994, p. 108).

In the final stanza, the poem's persona ultimately admits that now she is able to realize why her elders are real heroes and deserve to be the father of the Black race. She is now able to get their message and understand why they have used concealment, tricks and

submission throughout their youth. She is also able to realize how those old slaves have sacrificed their comfort and have endured abuse, humiliation and torture. It is only for the sake of saving the coming generation of the Black race from the threat of extinction. What is vital for them is to persevere and persist for the sake of keeping their families, children and grandchildren away from abuse and torture. In short, they were keen on keeping the Black race alive. To achieve this, they have endured all physical and emotional suffering and have preferred to remain powerless, submissive and inferior to spare their people miserable torture, inevitable death and destruction. Rather than challenging White domination by using violent resistance, they have tactfully resorted to laughter and music to empower themselves and become more resilient.

#### **4) White Americans' Cultural Imperialism**

Maya Angelou's poetry reveals her deep concern about the cultural domination of Black Americans by their superior White counterparts. Black Americans are always introduced in Angelou's poems as a dominated group whose members are subjugated and inferiorized. They are rejected and confronted by an attitude of hatred and animosity. The White are culturally prejudiced against them. This is why they are more or less regarded as the other who is uncivilized, savage, rude and cruel. They are often described as evil troublemakers and abusers. Moreover, they are identified as 'negros' and 'neggers'. Such a negative image of African-Americans is dictated by White Americans' racist stereotypes and biased attitude towards them. This justifies why they are treated as commodities with no equal privileges. From the White's racist perspective, the Black people, thus, deserve to live in isolation and segregation and receive unjust treatment. This type of culturally oppressive domination is the focus of such poems as "A in' t That Bad," "The Thirteens (Black)" and "Momma Welfare Roll."

Angelou's "Ain't That Bad" is a song of praise and celebration of the culture and values of African-Americans. In this poem, Angelou vividly imparts the wonderful sense of admiration for the African-Americans' great achievements in all spheres of life. She also imparts

an appealing sense of pride in the Black identity. Meanwhile, Angelou's poem is meant to advocate the culture and values of Black Americans against the stereotypical, distorted image propagated by the White. The White inferiorize Black culture and have no recognition for their identities. The poet, hence, attempts to remove the White's stereotypical image of them as savage people who have no effective roles in society by showing Black Americans' success stories including well-known Black musicians, artists, politicians and athletes. Such figures are model examples of the African-American identity which deserves recognition and appreciation instead of indifference, hatred and segregation. The unidentified Black woman-speaker refutes the derogatory description of African-American people as bad and black. She suggests that Black people's association with the idea of blackness and badness in character or conduct is a misconception. To correct such misconception, she uses the adjectives "bad" and "Black" (Angelou, 1994, p. 165) favorably in a positive context. The poem's context investigates how the Black community is exceptional, powerful and creative, rather than dangerous, ugly and mysterious.

Dancin' the funky chicken

Eatin' ribs and tips

.....

Now ain't they bad?

An' ain't they Black? (Angelou, 1994, p. 165).

The first stanza introduces Black culture in its simplest forms. The speaker describes how Black Americans are enjoying the daily pleasures of life in their own way including dancing, listening to the latest music, eating their favorite food and drinking. This is simply the culture of joyful people who celebrate their life and enjoy themselves in their own way. They have their own way of dancing and eating. Such simple actions signify their rich experiences in life and reflect their unique identities. Meanwhile, Black culture as described here refutes the White's conception that they are uncivilized savages. Rather the opening stanza introduces Black Americans as highly civilized and highly sensitive people who have

a great passion for dancing and music. In addition to having their specific way of living, Black Americans have their own vernacular which surely adds to their culture and their sense of pride. This explains why the poem is written in their colloquial, vernacular English.

The second stanza introduces more personalized and physical aspects of Black American culture. The lines describe how Black people enjoy wearing Black do-rags over heads not only to keep their hair well-combed but, more importantly, to add a new cultural aspect in their process of identity making. They also have their own unique hairstyle, known as "afro" (Angelou, 1994, p. 165), which is named after their identity as African-Americans. These styles keep their faces in good shape and make them physically attractive. In addition, all such personal matters reveal how much Black Americans are deeply attached to their culture and feel emotionally empowered by belonging to the Black race. The use of a rhetorical question in the concluding line of the stanza, "Don't I shine and glow?" (Angelou, 1994, p. 165), suggests Black Americans' sense of joy and satisfaction with their own culture, unique identity and style of living.

In the third stanza, the speaker describes more intimately the daily life activities of the African-American family. They always listen to the songs of Stevie Wonder while the wife is cooking their favorite dishes of beans and rice. In the evening they go to the opera house to watch the live performance and listen to the voice of Leontyne Price. What is significant here is the speaker's allusion to renowned Black American musicians and singers such as Stevie Wonder and Leontyne Price. Such figures contribute much to the African-American culture. They are, hence, a source of pride to all Black Americans. Each one of them certainly has her own success story. Stevie Wonder, for instance, is a talented musician and singer. He is a pioneer in the world of music and his influence on other composers is greatly felt. Leontyne Price, likewise, is an acclaimed soprano singer whose contributions to the major American opera houses are real evidences of her talent and her success.

Unquestionably, such Black American figures contribute much to the American cultural world of music. Their achievements and success negate White Americans' cultural view of their inferior identities as crude people who have no sensitivity, passion or taste for music and art.

The fourth stanza sheds light on four influential Black figures whose achievements embody the pervasive impact of Black American culture and thought on the American community in the fields of politics and art. The first line introduces the character of Jesse Jackson who is a well-known politician and a civil rights activist. He is recognized as a spokesperson and advocate for the rights of Black Americans and the have nots. The verb "get down" (Angelou, 1994, p. 165) is associated with Jesse Jackson to evoke his rare commitment in organizing campaigns for defending the civil rights of his Black fellows.

The second line focuses on Alvin Ailey who is a famous Black dancer and choreographer whose attachment to the Black race drives him to establish his famous dance theatre and a dance school in the United States to universalize African-American culture through the use of Black vernacular in his theatre and ballet performances. The verb "dance on" (Angelou, 1994, p. 165) is associated with his name to suggest his universal popularity and his deep influence on the American artistic scene.

The third line mentions the name of Barbara Jordan who is an American politician, lawyer and educator. She is known for her political speeches in defense of women, the poor and minority communities. She is the first African-American woman to represent Black American people in the House of Senate and is elected as a member in the House of Representatives. Her political speeches reflect her rhetorical eloquence. This is why the verb "talk" (Angelou, 1994, p. 165) is selected here to suggest her appealing manner of addressing her audience.

The last line of the fourth stanza refers to Pearl Bailey who is a Black American famous actress and singer whose performances reveal her unique identity as a Black woman. Her great contributions



to the universality of the African-American culture are tangible through her acting roles in artistic works and musical shows that reflect Black customs and traditions. The speaker uses the verb "groove" (Angelou, 1994, p. 165) with her to attract attention to her amazing performance in both acting and singing.

The fifth stanza, which is the center of the poem in terms of structure, serves as a chorus refrain. It provides a concluding commentary on the first part of the poem through the use of two ironic rhetorical questions which are repeated three times. The first of these two rhetorical questions ironically focuses on the description of Black people as "bad" while the second is concerned with their pejorative depiction of African-Americans as "Black" (Angelou, 1994, p. 165). The poet in this stanza produces a cultural counter-argument in which she reveals the cultural prejudice against Black Americans who are always associated, in the minds of White people, with badness of character and blackness of skin. Furthermore, White Americans, according to Ahmed (2021, p. 25), assign the negative quality of badness to Black Americans in order to universalize their description of Black people's achievements as 'bad'. In her counter-argument, Angelou illustrates how African-American people are far from being bad. They are, instead, good and highly influential.

In the sixth stanza, the speaker appreciates the blackness which characterizes the skin of African-American people. She uses two similes to describe how the black complexion brings a sense of comfort and deep attachment. In the first simile, the blackness of people's skins is compared to the most intimate hour of the night where lovers feel the passionate fervor and intensity of love. Similarly, the blackness of complexion is compared to the black color of the mother earth which is the source of fertility, richness and regeneration. The blackness of African-American people, in this sense, acquires a positive connotation which negates White Americans' stereotypical association of Black people with evil and mischief.

The speaker in the seventh stanza shows how the White community's negative view of the badness of Black Americans is a culturally-oriented misconception which gives a bad impression about Black people. The speaker's argument is based on the conviction that not all the bad are necessarily harmful. Bad storms, for instance, are often accompanied by the falling of heavy rain. Likewise, the scorching sun which is regarded as bad proves to be useful in drying up water and in water evaporation. The badness of Black Americans is compared to the badness of these intense natural phenomena in being useful, vital and vigorous.

In the eighth stanza, the speaker embarks on more Black American figures whose achievements and success add to the university and popularity of African-American culture. Such figures as Arthur Ashe, Mohammed Ali, Andre Watts and Andrew Young are important cultural icons who set a modal of success in the American community. Arthur Ashe is a well-known Black American tennis player who is the first Black American player to represent the United States in international tennis tournaments where he achieved remarkable success and popularity. Mohammed Ali is the famous Black American boxing champion whose strength and skills fascinate people all over the world. Andre Watts is the famous Black American pianist whose solo performances are deeply impressive and enchanting. Andrew Young is a well reputed Black American politician and civil rights activist. He is the first Black American who is elected to represent African-Americans in the American congress. Such people are now regarded as historically remarkable figures who inspire American life and culture with their power, potential and skillfulness.

In the penultimate stanza, the speaker imparts a sense of liveliness and vitality in the African-American lifestyle. Such liveness is evoked by the variety of colors that characterize their way of dressing. The colors of purple, pink and green are all bright colors. They suggest an attitude of hopefulness and optimism in their life. Their culture and their life are as exotic, unique and appealing "as rum and cokes" (Angelou, 1994, p. 166) which are

distinctive with their unusual flavors. They enjoy their life and their culture of acceptance and openness, instead of the culture of racist exclusion and rejection adopted by the White. The speaker, who now identifies with Black Americans by using the pronoun 'we', feels proud of her black color and is strongly attached to the Black race.

The woman-speaker concludes the stanza with an ironic rhetorical question: "Ain't we colorful folks?" (Angelou 1994, 166). This question reflects her rejection of White prejudice against minority communities including Black Americans and her sense of pride and celebration of the Black race. This is reinforced by the concluding refrain in which the words 'bad', 'Black' and 'fire' are made equal in order to inspire confidence and trust in the power and goodness of the Black American community. The exceptionality and uniqueness of African-American accomplishments in all spheres of life are, therefore, enough evidence of the partiality and offensiveness of White Americans' abusive culture which underestimates Black people and trivializes their efforts to assert their identities.

In "The Thirteens (Black)," Angelou vividly captures how Black American people are insulted and severely abused in a community dominated by the oppressive culture of the White. According to such a culture, White Americans feel free to abuse, offend and stereotype African-Americans on the grounds that they are Black. They, thus, put the blame on African-Americans themselves and regard their blackness as the focal point of their hatred and aggressiveness. Angelou's poem alludes to a game known as the dozens. It is a humorous game which is played verbally between two young males. The game starts when the two young contestants exchange insults and abuses severely and rapidly. It continues until one of them has nothing more to say and, thus, gives up. This game is popularly played in the ghettos of the African-American community. The insults uttered in the game usually focus on the player himself and his family members particularly his mother. The winner is the one who proves to be wittier and more verbally skilled than the other

participant. The game is developed as a result of White American oppression and injustice. Out of their anger and frustration, young African-Americans play the game because it represents for them a psychological source of relief and an outlet for their frustration. By playing the game, they also get themselves accustomed to hearing and enduring humorous insults from their friends before receiving serious, provocative insults and abuses from their White counterparts.

Although Angelou's poem is based on the idea of playing the dozens game, Angelou introduces some adaptations in her poem one of which is entitling her poem "The Thirteens" instead of 'the dozens'. The second change is found in the poem's number of lines. The poem consists of fifteen lines, instead of twelve which are divided into three stanzas of five lines each. A third change is the lack of reciprocal interaction between two contestants. The poem introduces only one speaker who insults the listener in an abusive manner. The final adaptation focuses on the identity of the speaker who is a White American citizen, instead of having a Black young man. Here, the White American young man reveals his own conviction of the Black identity through the number of insults with which he abuses his Black counterpart. The poem, thus, describes the scene of two young men engaging in a game where the speaker, who is a White-American, utters insults while the Black man is listening passively. The speaker's insults target the addressee, his family and his relatives out of hatred and racial discrimination.

In the first stanza, the White American speaker starts his long list of insults.

Your Momma took to shouting,  
Your Poppa's gone to war,  
Your sister's in the streets,  
.....

The thirteens. Right On (Angelou, 1994, p. 49).

The first line starts with "Your Momma". This is the traditional beginning of the dozens game. The speaker selects the Black listener's mother as his first target in order to make his insults more

provoking and enraging. He describes the mother as being uncouth and rude as indicated in his reference to her as a mischievous woman who gets used to shouting and disturbing others. He also insults the listener's father by depicting him as a poor man of a lower social rank who is struggling and suffering as a hard laborer for the sake of survival for himself and his family. The listener's sister becomes homeless and without a family shelter where she can live safely and respectfully. She is wandering the streets probably begging or being exploited sexually as a whore. Meanwhile, the listener's brother goes to the bar. The word bar either refers to the pub where he drinks alcohol or the prison. The brother, thus, is either an alcoholic or a prisoner due to a crime he has committed. The scene portrayed in the first stanza, in this sense, presents a collapsed family whose members are entirely broken and frustrated. They are responsible for their decline. They are, thus, reprehensible for their vulgarity and misdemeanor.

The speaker in the second stanza shifts to the Black man's other relatives including his cousin and his uncle in addition to his friend. Here the man's cousin turns out to be a heroin addict. The uncle, likewise, is revealed to be an alcoholic who goes to a shabby bar to drink alcohol. The Black man's friend is described as being a vulgar drug addict who runs quickly to take a small dose of drug. The stanza, in this way, portrays a group of addicts and escapists who take drugs or alcohol to escape the miseries of their dishonorable life. The White speaker also foregrounds their poverty and attributes it to their addiction. They lack money as indicated by the word "joint" (Angelou, 1994, p. 49) which imparts a sense of shabbiness and lowliness. They also lack moral conduct as suggested by the word "gutter" (Angelou, 1994, p. 49) which evokes a sense of vulgarity and immorality.

In the final stanza, the White speaker focuses on the Black man himself and how he regards him. He addresses him directly by using the pronoun 'you'. The Black man, as a result of his family's collapse, becomes an object of pity and sympathy in the eyes of the White speaker who feels sorry for his pathetic state. However, It is

ironic to see the White speaker feeling sympathy for the Black man particularly after all the insults and humiliation for the man's family and relatives. Thus The speaker actually intends to portray his disdainful victim as an object of scorn and ridicule instead of pity. This helpless Black man is now lonely and isolated with no company of relatives or friends. According to the speaker, the man deserves to remain alone and excluded because he is bad and immoral.

Throughout the poem, the White speaker is using a serious, ironic and scornful tone. Thus, the poem, which is supposed to present a humorous game, turns out to be an intentionally serious offence and humiliation of the entire Black race. Black American people, as Mahmood (2019, p. 619) observes, are negatively portrayed as uncivilized, vulgar, rude, corrupt and lowly people who always deviate from the accepted norms of a White-dominated society. This stereotypical, inferiorizing image is mainly based on White prejudice, hatred and racism against Black people. This negative image, unquestionably, creates an attitude of aggressiveness and hostility towards all African-Americans whose only fault, according to White American culture, is that they, unfortunately, were born Black.

The same practice of racial prejudice and cultural stereotyping is also illustrated in "Momma Welfare Roll." As evident from the title, the poem foregrounds the negative, stereotypical image of African-Americans, particularly women, as poor people who go on social welfare. These Black recipients of welfare become the target of White Americans' scorn and hatred. White Americans look down on them and ignore their presence in the community. They regard them as insensitive people who should feel ashamed of themselves for living on social welfare. In her poem, Angelou captures the stereotypical image of one of those people, namely a single Black mother who goes on welfare.

Her arms semaphore fat triangles,  
Pudgy hands bunched on layered hips

.....

Too fat to whore (Angelou, 1994, p. 148).

The woman is portrayed from the perspective of a child, the woman's daughter, as indicted in using the word 'Momma'. The child-speaker focuses her description on the physical appearance of her mother. Her description is skillfully rendered through a number of sensory visual images. She describes her arms, hands, hips, and bones. The woman's arms are fatty and take the shape of triangles when she rests her hands on her hips. The hands are short and fat and the hips are 'layered'. Her bones are weak. This is the description of a chubby and ugly mother who belongs to the downtrodden Black race.

The woman is also one of those single welfare mothers who suffer degradation and poverty as a result of negligence by White American society. This justifies why the mother is angry and in a bad mood as clear from the position of her hands resting on her hips. The mother's heavy weight and the weakness of her bones are caused by her poverty as indicated in her cheap, unhealthy meal. Her meal is fatback and lima beans because she cannot afford to buy pork meat. Her jowls are described as trembling as a result of the repeated crimes of injustice, exclusion and mistreatment committed against her. These crimes obviously intensify her feelings of anger, resentment and sadness. This is particularly so since she has children whom she is responsible for. These children are living in sheer deprivation with their mother. They live in a very poor neighborhood or a ghetto. Their house is very dark with no sunlight. The woman's children are neglected and regarded as strangers in a White-dominated community. These children lead a miserable life as they have no toys to play with. They play games in the darkened doorways and on the rooftops of their house and other neighboring houses. Due to their poverty and deprivation, these children miserably become juvenile delinquents as they steal the property of their neighbors. The visual images that are utilized in the first stanza help to reveal the miserable kind of life the mother is leading with her children. Their life represents the poor life of all Black Americans who live in cramped ghettos and hardly receive good education, health care or get well-paid jobs.

In the second stanza, more miseries are added to the mother's situation to intensify her suffering and her painful experiences. She is described here as idle and bare-handed. This emphasizes her destitution and bad need for social assistance. Black American women who are in such a state of indigence usually accept to work as prostitutes. The main problem with this mother's work is her chubbiness which makes her unattractive and, thus, inappropriate to work as a prostitute. Her resentment and dissatisfaction with her life make her unable to search for any other job. Her bad temper makes White Americans reject her and unwilling to give her a job. Thus, she cannot live safely or support her children financially. She remains helpless and seeks refuge in her dreams. She dreams of having good luck and of being rich to change and improve her miserable life. She finally has nowhere to go but to seek the assistance of the society by asking for welfare. She does not wait to receive charity from others. She willingly goes to the American government offices to ask for welfare. She herself admits that she takes welfare because she does not feel ashamed. She thinks it is her right to receive welfare from the White dominated society in order to be compensated for the injustice, inequalities and exclusion that she and her children experience daily in their life.

To Black people, this mother, in this sense, is a victim of exclusion and poverty, but she shows defiance and perseverance. She sets an outstanding example of Black pride and dignity. To White American society, however, the woman represents the stereotypical image of lazy Black mothers who do not search for a job and prefer, instead, to go on welfare. Such Black women are negatively stereotyped as the abnormal other who is quick-tempered, contentious and unappealing. This negative stereotyping unarguably adds to the oppression of Black people and exacerbates their distress and suffering.

### **5) Racist Violence**

One of the terrible consequences of the cultural domination and supremacy of White American people over their Black counterparts is the emergence of violence. This oppressive violence is laid bare



in Angelou's poems which repeatedly present various scenes of violent attacks and abuses against Black people who helplessly remain passive. Black Americans are always suffering in silence and helplessly experiencing hardships as a result of White Americans' merciless violations and aggressive violence. White Americans' racist violence takes both physical and non-physical forms. Physical violence is introduced in Angelou's poems through scenes of murder, sexual abuse, rape and corporal punishment. Non-physical violence, on the other hand, is presented through scenes of humiliation, intimidation, harassment, bullying, ridicule and insult. All such different forms of violence obviously show that the superior White Americans are constantly driven by feelings of hatred and hostility towards the Black. They also resort to violence and oppressive violations as a sign of their power and dominance. Angelou aptly exposes the different forms of racist violence in her poems "Our Grandmothers" and "The Calling of Names."

In "Our Grandmothers" Angelou deals with the horror and violence experienced by African-American slaves. She aptly reveals how they are mistreated by their White American masters who practice various forms of violence against them. The poem, which consists of fourteen stanzas, particularly focuses on the suffering of African-American women who fall under the oppressive system of slavery in which they are dominated and repressed by their White masters. It presents a slave mother who is struggling against the restricted life of slavery. She is living in horror and wants to get rid of the grip of her slaver. The use of the plural possessive 'our' in the title is very revealing. It signifies that this woman is, indeed, a representative of all the African-American women who fall victims to slavery and all those Black people who are exposed to the oppression and violence of White American community. Patil (2018, p. 180) affirms this fact by arguing that the delineation of the mother figure in the poem does not only refer to African-American women during the slavery period in the United States, but also extends to include Black women of the American post-slavery

community. Angelou, thus, introduces this Black mother as the poem's protagonist.

She lay, skin down on the moist dirt,  
the canebrake rustling

.....

.... I shall not be moved (Angelou, 1994, p. 253).

The poem's speaker is a third-person omniscient narrator who narrates how the woman is struggling and suffering for the sake of freedom. The unidentified woman, who is referred to with the third-person pronoun 'she', is introduced as a slave mother as indicated from the description of the setting. Apparently, the mother is trying to run away from her master by hiding in a canebrake plantation. Yet, she is chased by other slavers who are searching for her by using their hunting dogs. This scene obviously reflects the non-physical violence the Black mother is terribly exposed to. It is a scene of intimidation in which the helpless mother is fearing the rustling of leaves, the crackling of branches and the "loud longing" (Angelou, 1994, p. 253) of dogs. It is also a scene of humiliation which describes how the mother is lying down on "the moist dirt" and is followed by dogs and "hunters" (Angelou, 1994, p. 253). The mother who is chased by White American slaves is compared to an animal which is hunted.

The third stanza continues the description of this chase scene. The scene focuses now on the mother's children. They feel terrified of being caught with their mother by the White master. They are also afraid of being sold by slavers. These two opening scenes reveal how Black slaves receive violent treatment at the hands of White American masters during the slavery era in the American community. These White masters are described by the mother in the fourth stanza as "the keeper of our lives" (Angelou, 1994, p. 253). This, obviously, shows the miserable life of imprisonment these Black slaves were living. It also explains why the mother seeks to be released with her children. Yet, she fears punishment by being executed if their attempt to escape fails.

The poem's narrator recalls how the mother feels distressed and cries helplessly due to the toughness of her life. She suffers the agony of being a dehumanized slave whose hands are chained. Her real situation as a slave compels her to work endlessly in a rich landowner's plantation. She is torn between tedious work in his tobacco fields in Virginia and his other plantations in Arkansas and Georgia. This was exactly the lot of all Black slaves in these southern states. The landowners' richness is indicated by his luxurious possessions as the 'pianos'. Falling under the grip of such a merciless master makes the mother reduced to a "one Black body" (Angelou, 1994, p. 254) which signifies her dehumanization. The mother's body is not only exploited in plantation work but is also exposed to sexual invasion as she is sexually abused by the many "strangers" who "claim the glory" (Angelou, 1994, p. 254) of her love. She ascribes her exposure to this physical form of violence to the injustice of White American community which forces her to be raped and to be sexually abused. In addition, the mother admits the intensity of her suffering by describing herself as perishing daily. The verb 'perish' signifies her corporal punishment or her physical exhaustion as a result of her hard labor in plantations.

Moreover, the distressed mother does not only suffer exploitation and sexual abuse, but she is also exposed to the worst kind of non-physical violence, namely insulting and humiliating her by using debasing names. White American masters always call her, and other Black women, using such words as "nigger," "mammy," "baboon," "heifer," "whore," "property" and "creature" (Angelou, 1994, p. 254). These insulting names are metaphorically compared to ribbons that are swirling in the wind. This metaphor signifies that such insulting names are propagated throughout the American community and are used as part of the cultural stereotyping bias against Black people. These insults reveal the mother's humiliation to the extent that she is degraded to animals. They also reveal that Black women are negatively portrayed as obscene, indecent, vulgar and lustful. Such a stereotypical image of Black women evokes White Americans' attitude of hatred and antagonism towards them.

As a result of all such insults and humiliation, the mother finds herself emotionally and physically too weak to provide her children with sources of safety and protection. Her impotence adds to her agony and distress. This is why she decides to send her children away by running bare-footed to catch the underground. Thus, even her children are sharing her experience of torture and agony. The mother herself goes alone to seek refuge in another place where she is hardly recognized as a slave. When she reaches a temple, she is not permitted to enter due to her black skin. She, thus, experiences rejection and humiliation.

The penultimate stanza marks a shift in time from the era of slavery to the modern times. This shift is marked by the mother's transition from the world of slavery to the modern world of suffering and frustration. The lines of this stanza describe the dehumanizing scenes of the mother waiting in front of "the abortion clinic," standing in "the welfare line" and, worst of all, standing "on lonely street corners" (Angelou, 1994, p. 256) to sell her body. This modern world, in the eyes of the mother, turns out to be a world of confusion, challenge and bewilderment. This explains why the mother is "confounded" (Angelou, 1994, p. 256). As a matter of fact, she is unable to choose the course of her life. She is also broken, lost and completely exhausted by this racist community. Her impotence is reflected through these dehumanizing scenes in which she seeks social assistance, and in which she is ready to work as a prostitute to get money for the sake of survival. The mother, in this sense, is confronted by a merciless society whose White members are referred to as "her foes and detractors" (Angelou, 1994, p. 256). These White American people violently insult, derogate and humiliate Black people out of hatred and racial prejudice. The poor mother, who is a representative of all Black women, falls a victim to White community's oppression, injustice and cultural dominance. Consequently, she is totally deprived of leading a dignified life. She is also denied freedom, and desperately feels humiliated and abused. The Black mother's treatment as such shows the White masters' view of her as a commodity, and as an open target for contempt.

Therefore, she is exposed to all forms of violent practices such as sexual abuse, physical punishment, rape, intimidation and insult.

Similarly, in her poem "The Calling of Names," Angelou explores the systematic humiliation and vilification of African-Americans throughout history. She reveals how they are violently exposed to social abuse, insult and degradation. She also shows how they become objects of ridicule. The poem's title is very revealing in the sense that it discloses the White American community's systematic violation of Black people's rights by relying on the offensive strategy of calling names. This vicious strategy has to do with assigning debasing names to all the people of black skin in order to downgrade them and reduce them to commodities that have label names. In this poem, Angelou, according to Wedin (2011, p. 185), attempts a historical investigation of all the names that have been used to insult Black people. She also shows how calling names is one of the most violent and oppressive practices used by the White American society to segregate and exclude Black Americans not only socially but also politically, culturally and economically.

In this poem, Angelou vividly describes how Black people emotionally react to their naming:

He went to being called a colored man  
after answering to "hey", nigger".

.....

Nigguh, I ain't playin' this time (Angelou, 1994, p. 46).

The poem displays a list of all the insulting names ascribed to Black people since the time of their early enslavement. Each stanza marks a change in the names used to describe those Black Americans through different stages of their history. Thus, in the first stanza, during their enslavement, Black Americans are assigned the term 'nigger' which, due to its pejorative connotations, is regarded as the most abusive term used in naming them. White Americans use this name to call their Black slaves to humiliate and downgrade them. By so doing, they can easily subjugate and dominate them. The poet's use of the expression 'hey, nigger' reflects clearly how White Americans are violent and aggressive in their exercise of power and

domination over their Black slaves. The lines show these Black slaves as submissive and repressed people who respond passively without showing any signs of discontent or resentment.

The poem then marks a new change in the racist system of naming the Black by calling them colored people. The lines describe this new change as "a big jump" (Angelou, 1994, p. 46). This is probably because this new name is less violent and less debasing than the word 'nigger'. Yet, the name 'colored man' still reflects the racism of the White American community which classifies and identifies people according to the color of their skin and their races.

The second stanza describes how the old names 'nigger' and 'colored man,' which are used in calling Black people, are discarded and replaced by the term "Negro" (Angelou, 1994, p. 46) whose initial letter is capitalized. This marks a new significant development in the process of naming Black people. The term 'Negro' is politer and less offensive than 'nigger' and 'colored man'. Yet, it still retains racist insinuations. By using an insightful simile, the poet compares the naming of Black people as 'Negro' to the naming of Americans of Japanese origin as 'Japanese'. This, of course, is better than naming them as 'Japs' (Angelou, 1994, p. 46). The pejorative term 'Japs' was historically used by White Americans to label the American citizens of Japanese origin to insult and segregate them during the Second World War particularly after Japan's war declaration on the United States.

The third stanza signals a remarkable change towards the improvement of Black people's social status in a White-dominated community. Naming African-Americans has developed from calling them 'Negro' to 'Jews'. The poem's persona describes this remarkable change as a "big step" (Angelou, 1994, p. 46). This is simply because White Americans, by naming Black people as 'Jews,' recognize and approve their distinctive Jewish identities. This is the first time for Black Americans to have a culture and religion of their own. The term 'Jew' here applies to all Black Americans who have been able to restore their earlier religious and cultural identities as Jewish people. These are the people who were forced to convert to

Christianity during the slavery era by their White American masters. This terms, thus, suggests Black people's acquisition of more autonomy, more freedom and more distinct identities than before. They, hence, regard themselves as being equal to White Americans in social status. The stanza concludes with an allusion to a popular American song which evokes the feeling of grief, regret and guiltiness for the abandonment of their Jewish religion and the adoption of Christianity by force. Such allusion clearly reflects how White Americans resort to violence and intimidation in converting Black people to Christianity.

In the fourth stanza, Black Americans are labelled with a different name, namely 'people of color'. This term, which has been circulated in the United States since the last two decades of the twentieth century, is less derogatory and less frustrating. Rather, it focuses more on the cultural diversity of the American community. The term is also used to refer to non-White Americans including Asian Americans, Latino Americans, the indigenes in addition to Black Americans. Black people, in this sense, are made equal to other American minorities both in treatment and social acceptance. Accordingly, there is no distinction between Black Americans on the one hand, and Latin Americans who are light-skinned, East Asian Americans who are yellow skinned, and South Asian, Middle Eastern and South European Americans who are brown and dark-brown-skinned on the other hand. This is why the persona refers to using 'the people of color' label as an acceptable label. The 'man of color', particularly Black man is metaphorically compared to a man who is carrying a "Bouquet of Roses" (Angelou, 1994, p. 46). This metaphor suggests a sense of hopefulness, optimism and inclusiveness in the sense that the American community is now open to all people of color.

In the last stanza, the persona emphasizes the idea that Black naming has experienced a process of evolvement throughout history. Thanks to the struggle and persistence of Black people, their racial labels have positively changed from 'nigger' to Black Americans and African-Americans. African-Americans surely feel proud of being

labelled 'Black' which gives them self-satisfaction and leaves a positive impact on their collective identity. Angelou, as evident throughout the lines, skillfully manages to render a historical account of the development of Black labelling in such a concise poem. Her poem, according to Pramanik and Banerjee (2018, p. 62), effectively brings out her feelings of sorrow and grief for the deplorable situation of Black people in the American society. Pramanik and Banerjee explain that the poem also portrays how African-Americans are exposed to non-physical forms of violence including humiliation, social and political exclusion in addition to their degrading treatment at the hands of the White. Angelou, in this sense, manages to reveal how assigning derogatory names to the Black is socially accepted and regarded as one of the social norms that are tolerated by the racist White American society. In short, Angelou's poem makes it clear that such a racist society, by calling Black people pejorative names on the basis of their skin color, intensifies the racist oppression of African-Americans who are regarded as the inferior other and whose violent treatment is regarded as the most appropriate.

### **Conclusion**

Maya Angelou's poetry, as illustrated throughout the analysis of the poems selected, addresses five forms of racist oppression which precisely correspond to the five modes of oppression identified by Young in her oppression theory. Unquestionably, Angelou's poems capture the helplessness and adversity of Black American people who live desperately in a White dominant community. Her poems explicitly expose their painful experiences and utter deprivation. They also discuss the long history of Black enslavement and exploitation for the benefit of the dominant White. In her poetry, Angelou delves deeply into the realistic details of Black people's suffering by describing how they are entirely marginalized, denied active engagement in society and deprived of their rights in all spheres of life. She deplores the powerlessness of Black Americans and their lack of autonomy and lack of the freedom to express themselves or assert their identities. In addition, she explores the



negative stereotypes and distorted images of African-Americans whose culture and values are repressed, unrecognized and inferiorized in contrast to White culture and values which are prevalent, superior and socially accepted as the norms. Furthermore, Angelou's poems vividly depict how the helpless Black Americans are brutally exposed to both physical and non-physical forms of racist violence which inevitably add to their submissiveness and dehumanization.

In her poetry, Angelou pays much attention to the negative impact of Black Americans' vulnerability to all the five forms of oppression on their life. Those Black people, for instance, who are the targets of White masters' exploitation suffer humiliation, lack of equality, lack of self-respect and loss of power. Black marginals, likewise, suffer material deprivation including lack of food, shelter, health care and employment. They also suffer non-material deprivation such as feelings of worthlessness, lack of recognition and lack of the freedom of choice. Powerless Black people, similarly, lack social respectability, self-confidence and their sense of pride. In addition, those Black Americans who fall victims to White violence and aggressiveness are inevitably deprived of their dignity.

All such oppressed Black Americans are culturally stereotyped as the inferior other who is uncivilized, vulgar and cruel, and should be, thus, treated as a commodity and should be deprived of equality to the White. As a result of all such oppression and injustice, Black people, as described in Angelou's selected poems, are innocent victims of racial discrimination. They are much hated and segregated for no other reason than their black skin. This is why Black Americans always become objects of White prejudice and ridicule.

As a matter of fact, Angelou, as manifested in her selected poems, is deeply concerned about the suffering and victimization of African-American people. Her concern is made tangible through her identification with the exploited Black mother in "Woman Work" and "When I Think of Myself." She also identifies with the Black

female marginals in "Equality" and "No No No No" and the powerless Black people in "Million Man March," and "Song for the Old Ones." Furthermore, Angelou identifies with the culturally stereotyped Black American people in "Ain't That Bad" and the humiliated Black mother in "Our Grandmothers". The poet's identification with such helpless people justifies her use of the personal tone of anger and resentment and the use of the first-person singular and plural pronouns 'I' and 'we' in her poems. This emotional identification is also reinforced by using Black vernacular and the depiction of various realistic scenes of misery, humiliation, adversity and agony throughout her poems. These realistic scenes are repeatedly captured in such poems as "Woman Work," "When I Think About Myself," "No No No No," "Caged Bird," "Song for the Old Ones," "Momma Welfare Roll" and "Our Grandmothers".

What makes Angelou's poetic manifestation of the five forms of oppressing Black Americans remarkably distinctive is not only her emotional identification with them but also her unwavering determination to lay bare White Americans' aggressive violations and racist practices. Throughout her poetry, Angelou, for instance, discloses such oppressive practices as exploiting, marginalizing, subjugating, socially segregating, ridiculing, intimidating and humiliating African-Americans. Despite these abusive practices, Angelou, as a Black American poet, never gives up or loses hope. In her protest poems, including "Equality," "Million Man March," "Ain't That Bad" and "Our Grandmothers," she inspires the change of Black people's gruesome reality. In all such poems, Angelou attempts to stimulate Black Americans to resist White oppression and supremacy, challenge their stereotyping and exclusion, survive White hatred and prejudice, feel proud of their black skin and, ultimately, strive for freedom and equality with their White counterparts. Throughout her poetic career, Angelou, in short, expresses her conviction that Black Americans are not weak or submissive. Rather, they can defiantly struggle and persist to set themselves free from the grip of their White oppressors and get rid of all the forms of racist oppression.

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## Appendix

### Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

#### "Woman Work"

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 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.

Shine on me, sunshine  
Rain on me, rain  
Fall softly, dewdrops  
And cool my brow again.

Storm, blow me from here  
With your fiercest wind  
Let me float across the sky  
Till I can rest again.

Fall gently, snowflakes  
Cover me with white  
Cold icy kisses and  
Let me rest tonight.

Sun, rain, curving sky

Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone  
Star shine, moon glow  
You're all that I can call my own.

### "When I Think About Myself"

When I think about myself,  
I almost laugh myself to death,  
My life has been one great big joke,  
A dance that's walked,  
A song that's spoke,  
I laugh so hard I almost choke,  
When I think about myself.

Sixty years in these folks' world,  
The child I works for calls me girl,  
I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake.  
Too proud to bend,  
Too poor to break,  
I laugh until my stomach ache,  
When I think about myself.

My folks can make me split my side,  
I laughed so hard I nearly died,  
The tales they tell sound just like lying,  
They grow the fruit,  
But eat the rind,  
I laugh until I start to crying,  
When I think about my folks.

### "One More Round"

There ain't no pay beneath the sun  
As sweet as rest when a job's well done.  
I was born to work up to my grave  
But I was not born  
To be a slave.

One more round  
And let's heave it down,  
One more round  
And let's heave it down.

Papa drove steel and Momma stood guard,  
I never heard them holler 'cause the work was hard.  
They were born to work up to their graves  
But they were not born  
To be worked-out slaves.

One more round  
And let's heave it down,  
One more round  
And let's heave it down.

Brothers and sisters know the daily grind,  
It was not labor made them lose their minds.  
They were born to work up to their graves  
But they were not born  
To be worked-out slaves.

One more round  
And let's heave it down,  
One more round  
And let's heave it down.

And now I'll tell you my Golden Rule,  
I was born to work but I ain't no mule.  
I was born to work up to my grave  
But I was not born  
To be a slave.

One more round

And let's heave it down,  
One more round  
And let's heave it down.

### "Equality"

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

You do own to hear me faintly  
as a whisper out of range,  
while my drums beat out the message  
and the rhythms never change.

Equality, and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free.

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?

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.

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.

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.

### "Harlem Hopscotch"

One foot down, then hop! It's hot.  
Good things for the ones that's got.  
Another jump, now to the left.  
Everybody for himself

In the air, now both feet down.  
Since you black, don't stick around.  
Food is gone, the rent is due,  
Curse and cry and then jump two.

All the people out of work,  
Hold for three, then twist and jerk.  
Cross the line, they count you out.  
That's what hopping's all about.

Both feet flat, the game is done.  
They think I lost. I think I won.

### "No No No No"

No  
the two-legg'd beasts  
that walk like men  
play stink finger in their crusty asses  
while crackling babies  
in napalm coats

stretch mouths to receive  
burning tears  
on splitting tongues  
JUST GIVE ME A COOL DRINK OF WATER 'FORE I DIIIE

No  
the gap-legg'd whore  
of the eastern shore  
enticing Europe to COME  
in her  
and turns her pigeon-shit back to me  
to me  
who stoked the coal that drove the ships  
which brought her over the sinuous cemetery  
of my many brothers

No  
the cocktailed afternoons  
of what can I do.  
In my white layered pink world  
I've let your men cram my mouth  
with their black throbbing hate  
and I swallowed after  
I've let your mammies  
steal from my kitchens  
(I was always half-amused)  
I've chuckled the chins of  
your topsy-haired pickaninnies.  
What more can I do?  
I'll never be black like you.  
(HALLELUJAH)

No  
the red-shoed priests riding  
palanquined

in barefoot children country  
the plastered saints gazing down  
beneficently  
on kneeling mothers  
picking undigested beans  
from yesterday's shit.

I have waited  
toes curled, hat rolled  
heart and genitals  
in hand  
on the back porches  
of forever  
in the kitchens and fields  
of rejections  
on the cold marble steps  
of America's White Out-House  
in the drop seats of buses  
and the open flies of war

No more  
the dream that you  
will cease haunting me  
down in fetid swamps of fear  
and will turn to embrace your own  
humanity  
which I AM

No more  
the hope that  
the razored insults  
which mercury-slide over your tongue  
will be forgotten  
and you will learn the words of love  
Mother Brother Father Sister Lover Friend

My hopes  
dying slowly  
rose petals falling  
beneath an autumn red moon  
will not adorn your unmarked graves

My dreams  
lying quietly  
a dark pool under the trees  
will not carry your name  
to a forgetful shore  
And what a pity

What a pity  
that pity has folded in upon itself  
an old man's mouth  
whose teeth are gone  
and I have no pity.

### "Caged Bird"

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

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.



The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

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.

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.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

### **"Million Man March"**

The night has been long,  
The wound has been deep,  
The pit has been dark,  
And the walls have been steep.

Under a dead blue sky on a distant beach,  
I was dragged by my braids just beyond your reach.  
Your hands were tied, your mouth was bound,  
You couldn't even call out my name.  
You were helpless and so was I,  
But unfortunately throughout history  
You've worn a badge of shame.

I say, the night has been long,  
The wound has been deep,  
The pit has been dark  
And the walls have been steep.

But today, voices of old spirit sound  
Speak to us in words profound,  
Across the years, across the centuries,  
Across the oceans, and across the seas.  
They say, draw near to one another,  
Save your race.  
You have been paid for in a distant place,  
The old ones remind us that slavery's chains  
Have paid for our freedom again and again.

The night has been long,  
The pit has been deep,  
The night has been dark,  
And the walls have been steep.

The hells we have lived through and live through still,  
Have sharpened our senses and toughened our will.  
The night has been long.  
This morning I look through your anguish  
Right down to your soul.  
I know that with each other we can make ourselves whole.  
I look through the posture and past your disguise,

And see your love for family in your big brown eyes.

I say, clap hands and let's come together in this meeting ground,  
I say, clap hands and let's deal with each other with love,  
I say, clap hands and let us get from the low road of indifference,  
Clap hands, let us come together and reveal our hearts,  
Let us come together and revise our spirits,  
Let us come together and cleanse our souls,  
Clap hands, let's leave the preening  
And stop imposter-ing our own history.  
Clap hands, call the spirits back from the ledge,  
Clap hands, let us invite joy into our conversation,  
Courtesy into our bedrooms,  
Gentleness into our kitchen,  
Care into our nursery.

The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain  
We are a going-on people who will rise again.

And still we rise.

### "Song for the Old Ones"

My Fathers sit on benches  
    their flesh counts every plank  
    the slats leave dents of darkness  
deep in their withered flanks.

They nod like broken candles  
    all waxed and burnt profound  
    they say "It's understanding  
that makes the world go round."

There in those pleated faces  
    I see the auction block  
    the chains and slavery's coffles

the whip and lash and stock.

My Fathers speak in voices  
that shred my fact and sound  
they say "It's our submission  
that makes the world go round."

They used the finest cunning  
their naked wits and wiles  
the lowly Uncle Tomming  
and Aunt Jemimas' smiles.

They've laughed to shield their crying  
then shuffled through their dreams  
and stepped 'n' fetched a country  
to write the blues with screams.

I understand their meaning  
it could and did derive  
from living on the edge of death  
They kept my race alive.

### **"Ain't That Bad"**

Dancin' the funky chicken  
Eatin' ribs and tips  
Diggin' all the latest sounds  
And drinkin' gin in sips.

Puttin' down that do-rag  
Tightenin' up my 'fro  
Wrappin' up in Blackness  
Don't I shine and glow?

Hearin' Stevie Wonder  
Cookin' beans and rice

Goin' to the opera  
Checkin' out Leontyne Price.

Get down, Jesse Jackson  
Dance on, Alvin Ailey  
Talk, Miss Barbara Jordan  
Groove, Miss Pearlle Bailey.

Now ain't they bad?  
An' ain't they Black?  
An' ain't they Black?  
An' ain't they bad?  
An' ain't they bad?  
An' ain't they Black?  
An' ain't they fine?

Black like the hour of the night  
When your love turns and wriggles close to your side  
Black as the earth which has given birth  
To nations, and when all else is gone will abide.

Bad as the storm that leaps raging from the heavens  
Bringing the welcome rain  
Bad as the sun burning orange hot at midday  
Lifting the waters again.

Arthur Ashe on the tennis court  
Mohammed AH in the ring  
Andre Watts and Andrew Young  
Black men doing their thing.

Dressing in purples and pinks and greens  
Exotic as rum and Cokes  
Living our lives with flash and style  
Ain't we colorful folks?

Now ain't we bad?  
An' ain't we Black?  
An' ain't we Black?  
An' ain't we bad?  
An' ain't we bad?  
An' ain't we Black?  
An' ain't we fine?

**"The Thirteens (Black)"**

Your Momma took to shouting,  
Your Poppa's gone to war,  
Your sister's in the streets,  
Your brother's in the bar,  
The thirteens. Right On.

Your cousin's taking smack,  
Your uncle's in the joint,  
Your buddy's in the gutter,  
Shooting for his point,  
The thirteens. Right On.

And you, you make me sorry,  
You out here by yourself,  
I'd call you something dirty,  
But there just ain't nothing left,  
'cept  
The thirteens. Right On.

**"Momma Welfare Roll"**

Her arms semaphore fat triangles,  
Pudgy hands bunched on layered hips  
Where bones idle under years of fatback  
And lima beans.  
Her jowls shiver in accusation  
Of crimes cliched by

Repetition. 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.

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.  
"They don't give me welfare.  
I take it."

### "Our Grandmothers"

She lay, skin down on the moist dirt,  
the canebrake rustling  
with the whispers of leaves, and  
loud longing of hounds and  
the ransack of hunters crackling the near branches.

She muttered, lifting her head a nod toward freedom,  
I shall not, I shall not be moved.

She gathered her babies,  
their tears slick as oil on black faces,  
their young eyes canvassing mornings of madness.  
Momma, is Master going to sell you  
from us tomorrow?

Yes.  
Unless you keep walking more  
and talking less.  
Yes.

Unless the keeper of our lives  
releases me from all commandments.  
Yes.  
And your lives,  
never mine to live,  
will be executed upon the killing floor of innocents.  
Unless you match my heart and words,  
saying with me,

I shall not be moved.

In Virginia tobacco fields,  
leaning into the curve  
of Steinway  
pianos, along Arkansas roads,  
in the red hills of Georgia,  
into the palms of her chained hands, she  
cried against calamity,  
You have tried to destroy me  
and though I perish daily,

I shall not be moved.

Her universe, often  
summarized into one black body  
falling finally from the tree to her feet,  
made her cry each time in a new voice,  
All my past hastens to defeat,  
and strangers claim the glory of my love,  
Iniquity has bound me to his bed,

yet, I must not be moved.

She heard the names,  
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:



nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,  
mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon,  
whore, hot tail, thing, it.  
She said, But my description cannot  
fit your tongue, for  
I have a certain way of being in this world,

and I shall not, I shall not be moved.

No angel stretched protecting wings  
above the heads of her children,  
fluttering and urging the winds of reason  
into the confusion of their lives.  
They sprouted like young weeds,  
but she could not shield their growth  
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor  
shape them into symbolic topiaries.  
She sent them away,  
underground, overland, in coaches and  
shoeless.  
When you learn, teach.  
When you get, give.  
As for me,

I shall not be moved.

She stood in midocean, seeking dry land.  
She searched God's face.  
Assured,  
she placed her fire of service  
on the altar, and though  
clothed in the finery of faith,  
when she appeared at the temple door,  
no sign welcomed  
Black Grandmother. Enter here.

Into the crashing sound,  
into wickedness, she cried,  
No one, no, nor no one million  
ones dare deny me God. I go forth  
alone, and stand as ten thousand.

The Divine upon my right  
impels me to pull forever  
at the latch on Freedom's gate.

The Holy Spirit upon my left leads my  
feet without ceasing into the camp of the  
righteous and into the tents of the free.

These momma faces, lemon-yellow, plum-purple,  
honey-brown, have grimaced and twisted  
down a pyramid of years.  
She is Sheba and Sojourner,  
Harriet and Zora,  
Mary Bethune and Angela,  
Annie to Zenobia.

She stands  
before the abortion clinic,  
confounded by the lack of choices.  
In the Welfare line,  
reduced to the pity of handouts.  
Ordained in the pulpit, shielded  
by the mysteries.  
In the operating room,  
husbanding life.  
In the choir loft,  
holding God in her throat.  
On lonely street corners,

hawking her body.  
In the classroom, loving the  
children to understanding.

Centered on the world's stage,  
she sings to her loves and beloveds,  
to her foes and detractors:  
However I am perceived and deceived,  
however my ignorance and conceits,  
lay aside your fears that I will be undone,

for I shall not be moved.

### "The Calling of Names"

He went to being called a colored man  
after answering to "hey, nigger."  
Now that's a big jump,  
anyway you figger.

Hey, Baby, watch my smoke.

From colored man to Negro,  
With the *N* in caps,  
was like saying Japanese  
instead of saying Japs.

I mean, during the war.

The next big step  
was a change for true,  
From Negro in caps  
to being a Jew.

Now, Sing, Yiddish Mama.

Light, Yellow, Brown  
and Dark-brown skin,  
were okay colors to  
describe him then.

He was a Bouquet of Roses.

He changed his seasons

like an almanac.  
Now you'll get hurt  
if you don't call him "Black."  
Niggah, I ain't playin' this time.

## أشكال الاضطهاد العنصري للأمريكيين السود

### في قصائد مختارة للشاعرة مايا أنجلو

#### ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة كيفية تصوير الشاعرة مايا أنجلو في قصائدها لأشكال الاضطهاد العنصري الذي يتعرض له الأمريكيون السود داخل المجتمع الأمريكي الذي يهيمن عليه الأمريكيون ذوي البشرة البيضاء، ويعتمد البحث في ذلك على توظيف نظرية أوجه الاضطهاد لأريس ماريون يونج، ويحاول البحث أيضا التحقق من مدى فاعلية قصائد مايا أنجلو في الكشف عن الآثار السلبية الناجمة عن ممارسة أشكال الاضطهاد على حياة الأمريكيين السود واستمرار بقائهم ضمن مكونات المجتمع الأمريكي، حيث يتضح من خلال تحليل بعض القصائد المختارة للشاعرة مايا أنجلو أن هناك خمسة أشكال للاضطهاد العنصري للأمريكيين السود وهي: الاستغلال العرقي، والتهميش العنصري، وعجز الأمريكيين السود وقلة حيلتهم، والهيمنة الثقافية للأمريكيين البيض، والعنف العنصري. واستطاعت قصائد مايا أنجلو أن تقدم صورة واقعية لمأساة الأمريكيين السود الذين يعانون أشد المعاناة من التمييز العنصري، حيث تتمثل معاناتهم في تعرضهم للمهانة، والحرمان، وعدم المساواة، وفقدان الثقة بالنفس، وفقدان احترام الذات، ورغم ذلك عبرت مايا أنجلو من خلال قصائدها عن قناعتها بأن الأمريكيين السود يستطيعون مواصلة النضال من أجل تحرير أنفسهم من قبضة الأمريكيين البيض الذين يمارسون عليهم كافة أشكال الاضطهاد العنصري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مايا أنجلو، أشكال الاضطهاد العنصري، آريس ماريون يونج، نظرية الاضطهاد، أشعار مناهضة العنصرية.