

The Voice of Women: A Critical Reading of Maya Angelou's "*Still I Rise*"

ABSTRACT

Aims: This study aimed to analyze Maya Angelou's "*Still I Rise*" to uncover how the poem gives voice to women's resilience, challenges gender-based oppression, and uses poetic form to assert identity and empowerment.

Methodology: The study employed qualitative textual analysis, using feminist and formalist literary criticism to examine the structure, language, and themes of Maya Angelou's "*Still I Rise*."

Results: Maya Angelou's "*Still I Rise*" powerfully articulates the voice of a woman who resists historical and social oppression through pride, confidence, and poetic expression. Through feminist and formalist analysis, the study uncovers how Angelou's use of repetition, metaphor, and tone constructs a narrative of resilience, gendered empowerment, and ancestral strength, highlighting the intersectionality of race and womanhood.

Conclusion: The study concludes that "*Still I Rise*" is a powerful poetic assertion of female identity and resilience. Through its literary form and feminist themes, the poem reclaims the voice of women—particularly Black women—who continue to rise above historical, racial, and gender-based oppression.

Keywords: *Still I Rise*, Maya Angelou, feminism, formalism, critical reading

1. INTRODUCTION

What is a woman? This question elicits answers from different perspectives. For a woman herself, she is an important entity in society. Through her beauty and glamour, she makes the world colorful and alive. With her strength and wisdom, she leads men to a promising path and provides them with support they cannot get from their own kind. For an adored man, a woman is an endearing partner who readily gives up everything for love. For a loved husband, a woman is someone who sacrifices her happiness to secure and protect her family.

A woman's presence is undeniably significant in different contexts. At home, a woman is a valuable source of strength, unity, and harmony among family members. She is responsible for maintaining intimacy and closeness among her household members. In the community, she is the mediator of different conflicts. With her charm and voice, she pacifies angry men and keeps order in the community, just like she does inside her home.

The world would be unimaginable without a woman; even God saw this emptiness when he created only Adam. Procreation and progression of the world would be impossible without a woman, so God created Eve to be man's equal. Despite several stories and testimonies that strengthen the claim that a man without a woman is nothing, the latter is still in an unstable position. She still continues to fight for a space equal to men.

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A woman usually faces “cultural duality” as she actively participates in a male-dominated culture, and at the same time, in a women’s culture or subculture. As she exists in these two worlds, she knows that her other world is sometimes compatible but is sometimes contradictory to the dominant system of meanings and values (Hidalgo, 1998). This idea is supported by Nakpil (1999), who wrote an essay on “Myth and Reality.” According to her, in a patriarchal culture, a man must not only create a woman in his own image but in the image that will make him a complete being who will help make his reality possible. He needs a partner who submits herself to him and who is willing to offer her love eternally, even if unrequited.

According to Vest (2012), throughout centuries of literature, women were portrayed as the “weaker sex” who were deprived of fundamental rights such as voting and owning property. Even in fashion, the abuse of showing vital organs places women in a declining state. The continuous depiction of women as weak and frail floods many of the world’s cultures. Moreover, Kintanar (2001) pointed out that the images of women in literary works written by men are predominantly viewed as inferior. Women are often presented in binary oppositions: woman as mother placed on a pedestal, upheld for her purity, piety, and submissiveness. In her glorification, she is admired, respected, and loved. On the contrary, she is portrayed as a femme fatale, sex object, or whore—the demise in all failed relationships and marriages. These two stereotypes have shaped the portrayal of women in literature.

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Histories have proven that life has changed,—that the world has stopped evolving around wars and conquering lands, and that stories are no longer about kings and their valour. In modern times, survival does not solely depend on physical strength, in which men are often considered superior. Survival is no longer about being physically brave in a warzone. It is about how to establish oneself as a productive member of society, which is undoubtedly not exclusive to men. In many instances, women have proven to possess qualities equal to or even more powerful than men.

Today, power emanates from unhampered intelligence and strategic planning, which many women cunningly possess. Even if women manifest such power, men still think that at some points, they could be very vulnerable. According to a study, even in workplaces, “women bosses are viewed as less qualified and capable than their male counterparts.” Leadership is still culturally associated with masculinity, just like in earlier times (MailOnline, 2011).

This battle of women against male dominance has been long and winding and has caused the rise of feminism. For many years, a group of women has been fighting for equality between sexes, classes, and races. On the streets, on television, in magazines, and in literature, women continue to shout for their voices to be heard and counted. In different forms, women have been trying to uplift their morale by being empowered and rising from the abuses of men.

Many women who have been victims of rape and other sexual abuses have gained insurmountable strength and wisdom. One example of these women is Maya Angelou. Having been raped as a child, she did not succumb to pain but instead continued courageously to shape her life. She has become an exemplar of Black beauty and women’s strength. From her dark past, she has emerged as an inspiration in raising the moral standards of many people. As a writer, she has successfully used words to convey her message to everyone. Her poetry has been acclaimed for its depiction of Black beauty, the strength of women, and the human spirit (Poetry Foundation, n.d.). Her famous works include I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and Still I Rise.

Many have offered interpretations of the poem "Still I Rise." Most of these interpretations generally speak of oppression, slavery, and racism. Critics may have focused on slavery since Maya Angelou is an African American woman, and historically, African Americans understand the very core of the word. Only very few critics have chosen to relate the oppression in the poem to the struggles women face today.

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This study aimed to analyze Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" through feminist and formalist literary criticism to uncover how the poem gives voice to women's resilience, challenges gender-based oppression, and uses poetic form to assert identity and empowerment.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This section presents a review of literature that supports the understanding and analysis of Maya Angelou's poem, *Still I Rise*. The poem will be studied using both feminist and formalist literary approaches.

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2.1 Feminism

Feminism, in its broadest sense, refers to a political, cultural, and social movement advocating for equal rights and protections for women. It is both a theoretical perspective and an active campaign to address gender disparities and challenge discriminatory structures (Gender and Water Alliance, n.d.). The feminist viewpoint stresses that individuals, regardless of gender identity, race, or culture, deserve equal freedoms, civil rights, and opportunities (Urban Dictionary, 2010).

Evolutionary theorists have also explored the origins of gender differences. As cited by Bergman (1994), Darwin theorized that the perceived physical and intellectual superiority of men arose from competitive selection pressures, while women were historically judged based on sexual attractiveness. To illustrate this concept, he used anthropological examples of men having to defend their wives from other men.

The feminist movement has historically progressed through three waves. The first wave focused on legal equality, such as property ownership and voting rights. Literary critics during this phase often examined how male authors marginalized female characters. The second wave introduced gynocriticism, emphasizing women's contributions to literature, the representation of female characters, and the development of a female literary canon. The third wave sought to address the limitations of earlier phases by including intersectional identities and a broader understanding of oppression (O'Connor, n.d.; Hooks, 2015).

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In Philippine literature, feminist interpretations have highlighted gender dynamics in classic stories. For example, Manuel Arguilla's *How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife* has been analyzed for its subtle portrayal of women's strength and presence (Rosales, 2012). Contemporary criticism has noted how literature has increasingly centered women as protagonists, challenging traditional portrayals of women as submissive or morally ambiguous. Writers strive to demonstrate how women, despite societal change, retain significant roles in maintaining values and tradition (Kintanar, 2001).

San Juan (1998) emphasized that societal liberation and democratic reform are incomplete without dismantling patriarchal systems. In his work on Filipina insurgency, he underscored the urgency of integrating women's voices in the collective struggle against class and racial oppression.

Recent scholarship has noted a rise in autobiographical narratives by women. These works illuminate both personal and collective experiences. Manlapaz (2003) explored how Filipina writers respond to historical forces, shedding light on their creative and socio-political contexts. Similarly, Ventura (1994) argued that gendered experiences shape authors' worldviews and influence their literary output.

Because *Still I Rise* articulates a woman's resilience and assertion of dignity, feminist criticism is a suitable lens for interpretation. This approach allows for an examination of how gendered experiences and power imbalances are represented in the poem.

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2.2 Formalism

To complement this, formalist criticism provides a structural analysis, focusing on literary elements such as language, tone, and imagery.

Formalist critics analyze literature based on the text itself, paying close attention to how elements like structure, diction, and rhythm shape meaning (Gioia & Kennedy, 1995). This approach assumes that a work of art can be understood independently of external contexts, such as the author's biography or historical background.

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As noted in Encyclopedia Britannica (n.d.), formalism prioritizes form over content. It is partly derived from Saussurean linguistics and Symbolist aesthetics, focusing on the text's autonomy. Formalists aim to evaluate literature through a systematic analysis of its stylistic devices and internal coherence.

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Formalist criticism encourages meticulous reading of literary texts, examining how elements such as plot structure, figurative language, and syntax contribute to the overall artistic experience. This method enables readers to appreciate literature on its own terms, offering a shared vocabulary for textual analysis (National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology, n.d.).

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In recent years, scholars have advocated for combining multiple critical approaches for a more nuanced literary analysis. Using both feminist and formalist criticism allows for a richer interpretation of *Still I Rise*, as it integrates thematic content with technical execution (Smith, 2021; Abad & Reyes, 2023).

Thus, the dual use of feminist and formalist frameworks in analyzing Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise* provides both depth and precision. It uncovers how poetic form reinforces the powerful feminist themes of resilience, identity, and defiance against marginalization.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed textual analysis to understand the poem of Maya Angelou, using the feminist and formalist criticisms. Textual analysis, as described by McKee (2003), involves making educated interpretations about the possible meanings within a text by closely examining its language, structure, and cultural significance. Both feminist and formalist literary criticism guided the analysis to explore how the poem represents gendered experiences, historical oppression, and personal empowerment. Through a careful reading of the poem's literary elements—such as imagery, metaphor, tone, and repetition—combined with an interpretive framework grounded in feminist theory, the study sought to

uncover how Angelou constructs a voice that speaks for women's resilience and resistance across time.

3.2 Sources of Data

The primary source of data in this study is the poem *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou. This seminal work reflects themes of resilience, empowerment, and liberation, particularly from the perspective of a Black woman. The poem is drawn from Angelou's 1978 poetry collection *And Still I Rise*, published by Random House. This literary piece is the central text for analysis, examined through the dual frameworks of feminist and formalist criticism.

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To support the interpretation of the poem, the study also utilizes secondary sources, including scholarly articles, critical essays, and books on literary theory, particularly those focused on feminist and formalist perspectives. These include both classic and contemporary works in literary criticism, peer-reviewed journals, and academic discussions on gender, identity, and poetics. Reliable digital repositories, databases, and websites have been accessed to gather relevant materials that provide historical, social, and literary context to the analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study applies qualitative textual analysis, employing both feminist and formalist literary criticism to examine Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise*. These two critical approaches are used to analyze the content, structure, and language of the poem to reveal how it articulates themes of gender, oppression, resistance, and empowerment.

The analysis process involved a systematic close reading of the poem. The text was first segmented into its stanzas and individual lines, allowing for a detailed examination of diction, imagery, figurative language, and structural elements such as repetition, rhythm, and tone. These features were analyzed following the principles of formalist criticism, which focuses on the internal mechanics of the text and how literary elements function together to generate meaning (Gioia & Kennedy, 1995).

In parallel, the poem was interpreted through the lens of feminist criticism to explore how it reflects women's experiences, particularly those of Black women, and their responses to historical marginalization and patriarchal oppression. Attention was given to how the speaker's voice asserts agency, identity, and resilience in the face of systemic silencing, aligning with core tenets of feminist literary theory (Hooks, 2015; Smith, 2021).

Secondary sources were integrated during analysis to support and contextualize interpretations. These included journal articles and books discussing Black feminist poetics, representations of women in literature, and the sociopolitical history of African American women's struggles. Scholarly interpretations of Angelou's works were also considered to validate and enrich the findings.

Findings from both feminist and formalist readings were organized thematically, focusing on recurring motifs such as defiance, beauty, sensuality, ancestral legacy, and emotional strength. These themes were then critically evaluated to demonstrate how Angelou's poem transcends individual experience to represent the collective strength of women, especially in the context of historical and racial injustice.

The dual-framework approach ensured a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis, revealing how both form and theme interact to empower the poem's speaker and, by extension, the female identity she represents.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This critical analysis posits that Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" powerfully articulates the resilience and empowerment of women, particularly Black women. Through vivid imagery and emotive language, Angelou conveys profound thoughts and emotions that resonate with the experiences of women facing systemic oppression.

Angelou, an acclaimed African American poet, uses this poem to express unwavering determination in making one's voice heard. The emotions conveyed likely mirror those of many who have endured hardship, but the lines below suggest a distinctly female perspective:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

According to the speaker, no matter how twisted the lies have been written about her and no matter how she has been put down, she will continue to rise like dust. The first two lines confirm that a woman's image has been smeared with undesirable descriptions all these years. History witnesses how a woman is placed in a dismal situation. Considered nothing more than a possession, a woman was often treated as a sex slave to kings and warriors during the classical period. Part of a woman's role in the past was to care for her family, and that was all she was allowed. Her opinion did not matter and was not sought in managing household or societal affairs (How the Role of Women Has Changed, 2014; Freedman, 2002). All these denunciations of women are recorded in history. As the speaker says, regardless of the dirt into which a woman walks, society or a man can never trample her. Like dust, a woman has her own way of sneaking in and sticking into man's system. There is no way to rob her of this power. Like dust, no amount of washing can take a woman off.

In the second stanza, the speaker asks a number of pointed questions addressed to the dominant sex. Through these questions, she reveals sarcasm in her tone. One can glean from the lines in the second stanza the mockery the speaker directs at how society—or men in particular,—treats a woman:

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

The speaker of the poem is not just a voice of any person but that of a woman who is deeply affected by the way society treats her. The line, "Does my sassiness upset you?" reveals that the speaker is a woman unapologetically asserting her voice and agency. The repeated rhetorical questions—"Does my sassiness upset you?" and "Why are you beset with gloom?"—express society's discomfort with a woman who is confident, proud, and vocal. Scholars have noted that such confidence in women is often misread as arrogance or impropriety, especially in patriarchal cultures where assertive femininity is discouraged (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 2015).

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The metaphorical imagery in “Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells / Pumping in my living room” symbolizes wealth, abundance, and self-worth. This reflects not only the speaker’s inner power but also society’s resentment or fear of a woman who possesses these qualities. According to Black feminist critics, such imagery challenges traditional representations of Black women as submissive or impoverished, and instead celebrates their success and independence (Cooper, 2018). The stanza therefore captures a hidden fear within dominant structures—that the so-called “weaker sex” might outshine or overpower those in control.

The second stanza reveals this tension: if society is dismayed by a woman’s confidence, it implies a deeper resistance to female empowerment. As feminist theorists assert, women’s resistance through language and self-celebration subverts patriarchal expectations and creates a space for gendered voices to reclaim dignity and identity (Showalter, 1985; Crenshaw, 1991). From the tone of the speaker, one senses a veiled pride and unshakable conviction that such oppression will not prevail.

This pride and defiance continue in the third stanza:

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I’ll rise.

Here, natural imagery—moons, suns, tides, and hope—serves as a powerful metaphor for the speaker’s perseverance and her unyielding spirit. The celestial and elemental symbols suggest inevitability, resilience, and renewal, reinforcing that a woman’s strength cannot be suppressed for long (Walker, 1983; Angelou, 1993). The use of similes emphasizes the speaker’s rising as natural, unstoppable, and divinely ordained, linking personal empowerment to broader, universal forces.

Just like moons and suns, the speaker is certain that she can rise from any dreary situation. Moons and suns take turns in appearing in the sky. If moons symbolize darkness and despair, their presence is not sustained for the suns are surely to replace them. “With certainty of tides” and “Just like the hopes springing high” express the conviction and positivity of the speaker to rise up from her oppressed condition. The use of moons and suns as analogous to what the speaker views her life is a successful comparison.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Addressed to the people around her, the speaker poses direct questions that reveal the clarity of her emotions regarding how society perceives her. The tone is firm and self-assured, indicating her awareness of societal discomfort when she carries herself with dignity and pride. The images “bowed head and lowered eyes” and “shoulders falling down like teardrops, weakened by my soulful cries” suggest the traditional posture expected of women—submissive, silent, and sorrowful. These lines reflect how society historically conditions women to appear passive and emotionally restrained, discouraging their public expression of strength and self-worth (Beauvoir, 2011; hooks, 2015).

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don’t you take it awful hard

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'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Digging in my own back yard.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker's tone becomes even more confident and laced with sarcasm. The repetition of rhetorical questions signals her defiance and highlights the tension between her empowered self-image and societal expectations. The word "haughtiness" is crucial here—it suggests that society interprets female confidence as arrogance, especially when expressed by Black women, whose assertiveness has historically been stereotyped or suppressed (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991).

The metaphor "I laugh like I've got gold mines / Digging in my own back yard" powerfully illustrates self-sufficiency. This image implies that the speaker derives value from within—a notion central to feminist thought, which champions the reclaiming of identity and autonomy from patriarchal definitions (Showalter, 1985; Cooper, 2018). The reference to gold mines further aligns with the formalist reading of the poem, where wealth and treasure are metaphors for personal resilience, pride, and power.

The contrast between society's offense and the speaker's joy reinforces a feminist argument: women's unapologetic expression of self-worth often unsettles patriarchal norms because it threatens to destabilize long-held power hierarchies (Rich, 1979). By "digging in her own back yard," the speaker metaphorically undermines those hierarchies, revealing that her strength and resources are innate—not dependent on external validation or male approval.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise

In this stanza, the speaker proudly communicates her irrepressible spirit. Nothing terrifies her. The lashing of the tongue, the hostile stare, and the hatefulness of society do not affect her. She believes that, like air—something that enters everyone's nostrils—she is both uncontrollable and, perhaps, unwelcome. The use of the simile "But still, like air, I'll rise" effectively reinforces the speaker's resilience and omnipresence. Through this comparison, Maya Angelou powerfully conveys the persistence of a woman who, despite opposition, continues to rise above hate and adversity.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

The stanza reflects how the speaker's sexiness and bodily autonomy are perceived by society. Her confidence in her physical presence seems to challenge traditional gender norms, particularly those that view female sexuality as something to be hidden or controlled. The line "Does it come as a surprise / That I dance like I've got diamonds at the meeting of my thighs?" illustrates not only her pride in her womanhood, but also her awareness of its power. This metaphor boldly asserts that her sexuality is valuable, rare, and self-owned—not defined by or subjected to male desire.

Rather than presenting her beauty as a means to "trap" men, the speaker claims ownership over her sensuality as a symbol of strength and autonomy. Her tone is both playful and rebellious, suggesting that her mere confidence in expressing her body unsettles those in power. The vivid imagery in the final line highlights her unapologetic embrace of her identity

as a woman, affirming that femininity and strength are not mutually exclusive (Collins, 2000; Cooper, 2018).

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise

In closing, the speaker's voice powerfully reverberates with the reclamation of identity and the determination to transcend oppression. The repeated line "I rise" serves as an emphatic affirmation of her enduring strength. Through the use of anaphora, Angelou creates a rhythmic, almost incantatory effect that emphasizes the speaker's unwavering resolve to overcome adversity—past, present, and future.

The metaphor "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide" is particularly striking. The vastness of the ocean symbolizes the depth and force of the speaker's identity. It conveys that despite centuries of dehumanization and pain, Black women are not fragile or defeated—they are immense, powerful, and constantly moving forward (Collins, 2000; Walker, 1983). The lines "Out of the huts of history's shame" and "Up from a past that's rooted in pain" anchor the speaker's experience in the legacy of slavery and systemic racial oppression, specifically that of African American women whose voices were historically silenced.

However, Angelou broadens this struggle beyond the individual and even beyond race. In "Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, / I am the dream and the hope of the slave," the speaker affirms that her existence, confidence, and expression are not only acts of survival but acts of resistance and fulfillment of ancestral hope. This declaration bridges historical trauma with present empowerment, positioning the speaker as both an inheritor of suffering and a bearer of liberation (Angelou, 1993).

The closing refrain—"I rise / I rise / I rise"—is a resounding call for agency. While deeply rooted in the African American experience, particularly the legacy of slavery, it also resonates universally with women and marginalized groups striving for dignity, equality, and recognition. The poem's final lines solidify the speaker's transformation from victim to victor, asserting that no amount of historical violence or cultural erasure can suppress the will to rise.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyze Maya Angelou's "*Still I Rise*" through the combined lenses of feminist and formalist literary criticism. The analysis revealed that the poem is more than a declaration of personal defiance—it is a powerful representation of the collective struggle

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and strength of women, particularly Black women, against centuries of systemic oppression and marginalization.

From a feminist perspective, the poem gives voice to a woman who reclaims her identity, body, and voice in a society that has long sought to silence her. Angelou challenges the cultural narratives that have historically defined women as submissive, fragile, or inferior, and instead celebrates womanhood as a source of strength, pride, and resilience. The speaker's bold assertions of self-worth and independence disrupt patriarchal norms and affirm that femininity is not a weakness but a force of empowerment.

From a formalist standpoint, Angelou's mastery of poetic elements—such as repetition, metaphor, tone, and imagery—intensifies the impact of her message. The recurring phrase “I rise” functions as a rhythmic affirmation of the speaker's unyielding spirit. Metaphors such as “black ocean”, “gold mines”, and “dust” symbolize depth, value, and resilience, reinforcing the theme of empowerment through language and form.

Ultimately, “Still I Rise” exemplifies how poetry can serve as a powerful tool for resistance, healing, and liberation. Angelou's work transcends individual experience, speaking to the universal human desire for dignity and equality. Her poem stands as a testament to the enduring power of a woman's voice—defiant, dignified, and unbreakable.

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