

A JOURNEY OF INSECURITY: THE BLACK FEMALE'S VULNERABILITY IN SELECTED POEMS BY MAYA ANGELOU

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In her world, language serves content.
Characteristic depth of meaning blossoms and
pollinates her work. She is a vintage
craftswoman plying her artistic tools with
polished economy and confidence.ⁱ

Antar S. Mberi

Maya Angelou (b. 1928) is an American poet and autobiographer. She was described as “one of the world’s most exciting women ... Maya, the eternal female.”ⁱⁱⁱ While living with her grandmother, Angelou “was quickly immersed in the matrix of fear, surveillance, and racially centred violence that defined black life in the segregated South.”ⁱⁱⁱ The early divorce of her parents made for an unstable relationship with both, although her mother, Vivian Baxter, eventually emerged as the more influential parent.^{iv} Angelou comments on her relationship with her mother in an interview saying: There is the person who can be a great parent of small children. They dress the children in sweet little things with bows in their hair and beads on their shoestrings and nice, lovely little socks. But when those same children get to be 14 or 15, the parents don’t know what to say to them ... my mom was a terrible parent of young children. And thank God ... I was sent to my paternal grandmother. Ah, but my mother was a great parent of a young adult.^v Her life with her grandmother put her face to face with the suffering of the black community. She had great hopes and dreams as a child but the society often disappointed her with harsh remarks about her coloured features. Her playmates in school called her “shit colour”^{vi} and some relatives gave themselves the right to yell at her when offended by her silence.^{vii} At her eighth grade graduation, the principal’s speech was quite a shock that disarmed little Maya: The *white kids* were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gaugins, and *our boys* (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens^{viii} and Joe Louises.^{ix} (Italics mine) The speech shattered any hope for Maya because the principal did not see any future for black little girls; the black boys were taken shallowly, but the black girls were not taken in consideration at all. He was one of the many men who forced Angelou into a low life and continuous struggle. She worked in transportation, food service, night clubs and other jobs.^x The struggle finally led her to decide to “invent” herself:

I decided many years ago to invent myself. I had obviously been invented by someone else – by a whole society – and I didn’t like their invention.^{xi} Part of the process was discovering her potentials. A school teacher helped Angelou discover her writing talent. That very gift got her out of the silence that lasted for five years after the rape. A consistent theme in her poetry was the “struggle to

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maintain a healthy sense of individuality amid the unrelenting social terrors faced by black Americans from within a national machinery of racial and sexual oppression.”^{xii} If she were asked to do anything, she would never refuse even if she did not know how to do it. she explained the dilemma saying: “If I don’t do it, it’ll be ten years before another black woman is asked to do it.”^{xiii}

The early years of her being an adult were the most difficult. She had to accept to be a mob man’s kept-woman to support her child. Abandoned by her father, having a drug-addict for a mother, being abused by her mother’s boyfriend, and being a single mother herself at a very young age made her suffer inner struggle. That struggle created within her a sense of insecurity which was reflected clearly in her poetry. That insecurity developed slowly but steadily through the volumes she wrote. Starting with *Just Give me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diie* (1971), her fears were mostly personal represented by fear of men, or rather, the fear of being abandoned.

They went home and told their wives,
that never once in all their lives,
had they known a girl like me,
But . . . They went home.

.....

My praises were on all men's lips,
they liked my smile, my wit, my hips,
they'd spend one night, or two or three.

But . . .^{xiv}

It was the insecurity taking the shape of a man for young Maya. Her human environment is littered with troubled males: drug users, pimps, pushers, gamblers, and the despondent, the latter category being one that includes her brother. While she acknowledges the “dehumanizing pressures” on many of these men, she finds her relative naivete’, loyalty, and straightforwardness abused by those who profess to care for her.^{xv} Her body becomes a tool for the furthering of their personal and professional goals, an often sexist breach of trust that requires healing and much positive support from her mother as well as a cluster of female friends.^{xvi} The “young Maya,” in these early poems, is a symbol for every young black female.^{xvii} The fear took another shape as she matures: the African American struggle for recognition and independence. With that shift, Angelou’s fears were presented in the imagery of the blacks as victimized in a white-dominant society. She began to realize her origins and tried hard to, not only search for them, but also establish them in her poems. Her second part of *Just Give me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diie* is dedicated to the case. In “When I Think of Myself,” she started with glimpses of her life which she considered worth laughing at (not happily, of course) then she transcended her thoughts and fears to her people’s suffering

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.^{xviii}

Portraying such a scene in an apparently comic way would probably create a sense of tragic irony which flavoured the rest of her volume. Her vocabulary became a mixture of "blacks," "maids," slavery," etc.

On a bright day, next week
Just before the bomb falls
Just before the world ends
Just before I die

All my tears will powder
Black in dust like ashes
Black like Buddha's belly
Black and hot and dry^{xix}

Although Buddha was not black, she transformed the statue to be a symbol of belongingness. If Buddha became black, her people would have the right to belong to him, or he to them.^{xx} Angelou still felt threatened, though in a different sense; she was no longer the young female but the mature woman who would stand for her race.

My guilt is "slavery's chains," too long
the clang of iron falls down the years.
This brother's sold, this sister's gone,
is bitter wax, lining my ears.
My guilt made music with the tears.

My crime is "heroes, dead and gone,"
dead Vesey, Turner, Gabriel,
dead Malcolm, Marcus, Martin King.
They fought too hard, they loved too well.
My crime is I'm alive to tell.^{xxi}

Being representative of her people added only more insecurity to her poetry. As if there was a definite enemy or source of threat in the past and now it was bigger and more powerful. She was a smaller and more definite being and she became a whole people. It scared her and shocked her into more melodramatic thoughts:

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

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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.

.....
He changed his seasons
like an almanac.
Now you'll get hurt
if you don't call him "Black."
Nigguh, I ain't playin' this time.^{xxii}

As a member of the black society herself, she did not like how black young men accepted the new humiliation. The person set to be criticised was a male, of course, as the male remained the symbol of wrong-doings in her life. The change in the name-calling was very crucial to her. The word “nigger” was (and still is) considered insulting and, thus, transforming it into “Negro” was not much of an accomplishment as it still defined a race by the colour of their skin. The mere fact that her people accepted the new nickname was insulting to her. The word “Black” came next, also capitalized, to recognize them by colour, as well. The source of threat is now the society, the government, the people surrounding her (and all the African-Americans) who would sacrifice her race for their own benefit.

I don't ask the Foreign Legion
Or anyone to win my freedom
Or to fight my battle better than I can,
.....
I'm afraid they'll have to prove first
That they'll watch the Black man move first
Then follow him with faith to kingdom come.
This rocky road is not paved for us,
So, I'll believe in Liberals' aid for us
When I see a white man load a Black man's gun.^{xxiii}

Angelou found it hard to believe in the equality of the black and white. She set up a goal to achieve before believing the false slogans of the Liberals: to see a white man loading the gun of a black man, metaphorically, of course, as the civil war was over already. However, setting such an image showed the way Angelou regarded these slogans. They were impossible to achieve and if ever considered true, they would never be taken seriously by the whites. The blacks must stand up for themselves. In this phase, she was representative of the victimized blacks not the “Bourgeois” who imitated the whites in all they did, what suggested probably that they would imitate them even in segregating the blacks as well.

The Black Bourgeois, who all say "yah"
when yeah is what they're meaning,
should look around, both up and down,
before they set out preening.

"Indeed," they swear, "that's what I'll wear
when I go country-clubbing."
I'd remind them please, look at those knees,
you got at Miss Ann's scrubbing.^{xxiv}

Angelou reminded the African American bourgeois of the time when they were slaves scrubbing the floor of some white lady. Naturally, they were supposed to despise the white life not to adopt it; they made whitened monsters of themselves.^{xxv} A comparison between the black and white was held in her poems "The Thirteens" which fall into two sections "Black" and "White." It criticized both whites and blacks but there is still a belief in the innate goodness of the blacks and the innate evil of the whites. Angelou believes the whites were a corrupt society and being in touch with them would only corrupt the pure blacks. The social and racial troubles they had already suffered were caused, Angelou believed, by the "white trash."^{xxvi}

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.^{xxvii}

The members of one family were taken as an example to stand for a whole black society. They did things they had never done before; as if it was not their nature to commit such mistakes. The mother "took to" shouting: she was not usually ill-behaved as the whites might portray a black woman. she "took to" it because of the white influence. The father was sent to war; he was not fighting for principles and no clear justification was given as to why he had "gone" to war. The father probably followed the whites in whatever they did even if that meant committing suicide. The sister, brother, uncle, cousin, and others kept imitating a fallen society until they became part of a fallen culture themselves. They thought drinking and staying out late would make them more familiar to the whites and they might be, even if by a long shot, finally accepted. Angelou, consciously or subconsciously, presented the desperate attempts of a generation to fit in a society that rejected them continuously and forcefully. Their despair led them to

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blindly imitate the other and, failing, they were dragged to a status which was worse than before. On the other hand, the white society was skilfully corrupt. They committed all kinds of sins and passed un-judged:

Your Momma kissed the chauffeur,
Your Poppa balled the cook,
Your sister did the dirty,
in the middle of the book,
The thirteens. Right On.

Your daughter wears a jock strap,
Your son he wears a bra,
Your brother jonesed your cousin
in the back seat of the car.
The thirteens. Right On.^{xxviii}

They violated every known law of civilized society. They trespassed on religion and every sacred family relation. However, they were never punished or judged as lowly because of a sole, though not good enough, reason: they were white. The blacks' lives could be uneasy but they still had the means to change their fate; a feeling which developed in her later poetry into a stronger belief in her race's ability to stand for themselves and fight. Angelou agreed to befriend a white female, Louise Cox, and married a white man, Tosh Angelos, at the end of this journey of suspicion in the white race.^{xxix} These two changes in her life made her accept the other (the white race) not as an opponent but as a co-human. Maya tried harder to look in her origins in compensation for the lost objective. That phase could be said to have ended when Angelou changed her name from "Marguerite Angelos" to "Maya Angelou." She needed a fresh start in a new city with a new job. She dropped the "s" using a "u" instead in her last name. As for "Maya," her brother used to call her "my sister" then he shortened it to "my" and finally changed to "Maya." It was the name she felt fit her most.^{xxx} Angelou's new journey started with the new belief in her race. She travelled to Ghana with her son who attended the University of Ghana. She was literally transformed into a better and more stable person there. Angelou commented on her new experience:

I never felt I belonged anywhere until I went to Ghana. Then parts of me relaxed that I didn't even know I had. My soul relaxed. Of course, I could never write that line. Too purple. But that's how I felt.^{xxxi}

Actually, Angelou got more chances than white Americans in Ghana. She was offered a job at the university where her son studied. She finally felt welcome. The diction of the new phase varied along with the themes Angelou had to offer. "Africa," "Congo," "Pharos," "the Nile," "pyramids," and "crocodile" were repeatedly mentioned in her later poetry. She identified herself with these words because they represented her origin, the place where she would have felt secure.

In her next collection, *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975), the insecurity changes to self-realization:

I went to a party
out in Hollywood,
The atmosphere was shoddy
but the drinks were good,
and that's where I heard you laugh.
I then went cruising
on an old Greek ship,
The crew was amusing
but the guests weren't hip,
that's where I found your hands.
On to the Sahara
in a caravan,
The sun struck like an arrow
but the nights were grand,
and that's how I found your chest.
An evening in the Congo
where the Congo ends,
I found myself alone, oh
but I made some friends,
that's where I saw your face.^{xxxii}

The Congo here was some final destination where she could feel secure and find what she was looking for. Consciously or subconsciously, Angelou identified the satisfaction of her needs and the fulfilment of her wishes with her African origin. Strangely enough, Angelou's trust in her race as well as herself reached a very high level when she considered being black a hope, a beginning in itself:

Your skin like dawn
Mine like dusk.
One paints the beginning
of a certain end.
The other, the end of a
sure beginning.^{xxxiii}
And she suggested with full confidence:
Will I be less
dead because I wrote this
poem or you more because
you read it
long years hence.^{xxxiv}

As a part of her self-realization, Angelou set a very interesting comparison between Africa and America in two poems of the same titles that appear successively in her anthology:

Thus she had lain
sugarcane sweet
deserts her hair
golden her feet
mountains her breasts

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two Niles her tears.
Thus she has lain
Black through the years.
Now she is rising
remember her pain
remember the losses
her screams loud and vain
remember her riches
her history slain
now she is striding
although she had lain.^{xxxv}

Beautifully, Angelou created an African goddess-like figure. All features of that figure were taken from the surrounding nature. Nothing was imposed nor borrowed from other cultures this time. While in “America”:

The gold of her promise
has never been mined
Her borders of justice
not clearly defined
Her crops of abundance
the fruit and the grain
Have not fed the hungry
nor eased that deep pain
Her proud declarations
are leaves on the wind^{xxxvi}

America, for Angelou, was a golden (not gold) place. It was tempting and apparently beautiful for many, but the too much corruption disfigured that beauty. American lands grew crops and had gold within, but neither was used. Symbolically, appearances fooled many in America and they lay lazily under the tree waiting for the apple to fall. Many poems in the collection have more “bite—the anguished and often sardonic expression of a black in a white-dominated world.”^{xxxvii} Angelou’s “victimization” was held in balanced state with her heroic drive for “self-actualization” and her “desire to succeed.”^{xxxviii} Of key importance was the belief that through intelligence, perseverance, and acquired skills, the fulfilment of seemingly impossible goals was possible and, indeed, imperative for survival and ultimate growth.^{xxxix} Even when faced with indignities (racism, abusive relationships, job stress, depression, intense personal loss), her actions had exemplified how inner resources, no matter how atrophied or abused, could be revived through a mixture of initiative, creative thinking, and common sense. That un-mutable spirit suggested “a very American kind of optimism.”^{xl} Angelou, in turn, was an emblematic figure, especially in what might be called the “self-made, self-help” tradition of American literary heroism.^{xli}

The poetess returned to USA to end her career. She settled there, keeping a room in a hotel where nothing familiar could distract her. It was the room that witnessed her great autobiographical writings. Maya Angelou, in an interview, said she would go to that room as early as 6:30 in the morning and never leaves until 12:30. Interestingly, even when she was inspired to write more, she never

stayed later than 2:00 to “ascertain that I do live and people remember me,”^{xliii} as she put it. Being forgotten became her new fear. After all, the American society failed to grant the talented Maya Angelou any security.

NOTES

ⁱ Harold Bloom (ed.) *Black American Women Poets and Dramatists*. (New York: Chelsea House, 1996), 8.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 4.

Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, *Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Color*, vol.1, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006), 11.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v Lucinda Moore, “A Conversation with Maya Angelou at 75,” in *Maya Angelou: Poet*, Vicki Cox (ed.) (New York: Chelsea House, 2006), 106.

^{vi} Dana Chamblee-Carpenter, “Searching for a Self in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,” in *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Harold Bloom (ed.), (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 89.

^{vii} Angelou was raped by her mother’s boyfriend at the age of 7. He was imprisoned then released to be killed by people. The shock made Maya silent for about five years.

See: Moore, 103.

^{viii} Jesse Owens was one of the greatest track-and-field athletes. He won four gold medals in Berlin in 1936. Adolf Hitler refused to acknowledge that award because Owens was black.

See: Encarta: Microsoft Student, DVD 2009, s. v. “Jesse Owens.”

^{ix} Quoted in Chamblee-Carpenter, 88.

Joe Louis (1914 - 1981) was an American Boxer. His first loss came in 1936 to the former world champion, the German boxer Max Schmeling. The Nazis took advantage of the result to emphasize the superiority of the Nazis over democracy.

See: Encarta, s. v. “Joe Louis.”

^x Beaulieu, 12.

^{xi} Quoted in Chamblee-Carpenter, 87.

^{xii} Beaulieu, 11.

^{xiii} Moore, 105.

^{xiv} Maya Angelou, “They Went Home,” in *The Complete Works of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 1994), 7. Lines 1-4, 9-12.

All subsequent references to Maya Angelou’s poems will be taken from this source. Further references to the poems will include the poem title and line numbers only.

^{xv} Beaulieu, 12-13.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*

^{xvii} Claudia Tate, “Maya Angelou: An Interview,” in *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook*, Joanne M. Braxton (ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 150.

^{xviii} “When I think of Myself,” 15-21.

^{xix} “On a Bright Day Next Week,” 1-8.

^{xx} Langston Hughes (1902 - 1967), a black poet, used the same technique but with Christ in his “Christ in Alabama”:

Christ is a nigger,
Beaten and black:

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.....
Mary is His mother:
Mammy of the South,
.....
God is His father
White Master above
.....
Most holy bastard
(lines 1-2, 4-5, 7-8, 10)

The new black Christ provides a sense of belongingness, like the black Buddha. To be oppressed by the whites and worship a white god at the same time may sound unfair. Suggesting that Christ was black and, thus, of their own race makes it more reasonable to deify him. Hughes pushes the image to the extremes by portraying God as a white master and Mary as his black slave, making Christ, thus, their bastard “nigger” son.

Arnold Rampersad (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 143.

^{xxi} “My Guilt,” 1-10.

^{xxii} “The Calling of Names,” 1-10, 21-25.

^{xxiii} “On Working White Liberals,” 1-3, 7-12.

^{xxiv} “Sepia Fashion Show,” 9-16.

Sindiwe Magona, another black poetess, says “Perhaps children in other countries played^{xxv} at being kings and queens; we just played at being white.”

See: Siphokazi Koyana and Rosemary Gray, “Growing Up with Maya Angelou and Sindiwe Magona: A Comparison,” in Bloom *Maya Angelou's I Know...*, 96.

^{xxvi} Pierre A. Walker, “Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form” in Bloom, *Maya Angelou*, 22.

^{xxvii} “The Thirteens (Black),” 1-10.

^{xxviii} “The Thirteens (White),” 1-10.

^{xxix} Their marriage lasted for three years only. See: James Robert Saunders, “Breaking out of the Cage: The Autobiographical Writings of Maya Angelou,” in Bloom, *Maya Angelou*, 8.

^{xxx} Beaulieu, 13-14; Saunders, 9.

^{xxxi} Quoted in *Ibid.*, 12.

^{xxxii} “Here's to Adhering,” 1-20.

^{xxxiii} “Passing Time,” 1-6.

^{xxxiv} “Wonder,” 10-14.

^{xxxv} “Africa,” 1-8, 18-25.

^{xxxvi} “America,” 1-2, 5-8, 16-19.

^{xxxvii} Bloom, *Black American...*, 3.

^{xxxviii} Beaulieu, 11.

^{xxxix} *Ibid.*

^{xl} *Ibid.*, 12.

^{xli} *Ibid.*

^{xlii} Carol E. Neubauer, “An Interview with Maya Angelou,” in *Maya Angelou*, Harold Bloom (ed.), (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 21.

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