Maya Angelou’s poems are written testimonial narratives that reveal the transition from an intense experience of racial disparity to a world that must accommodate the ‘phenomenal woman’. Her growth reflects the strength and individuality of womanhood. Angelou has brought to light how she has had to endure appalling incidents, incidents that were in themselves hostile and filled with racial prejudice. To overcome these moments of hostility, Angelou used an alternate identity by imagining herself to fit into the vision of perfection that the white world surrounding her community projects. As an artist and a woman, Angelou had risen from a sense of displacement to being unashamed of her present and her past equally. While in “Fightin’ Was Natural” from the volume *I Shall Not Be Moved*, Angelou documents the effectiveness of “fighting” the odds

>Fighting’ was natural,  
Hurting’ was real,  
And the leather like lead  
On the end of my arm  
Was a ticket to ride  
To the top of the hill.  
Fighting’ was real. (1-7)

in “Weekend Glory” Angelou glorifies the fact that she is “able to work”
My life ain’t heaven
But it sure ain’t hell.
I’m not on top
But I call it swell
If I’m able to work
And get paid right
And have the luck to be Black
On a Saturday night.(44-51)

By transcending her personal bitterness and transcribing it into poetry, Angelou establishes “communication with earlier African-American art forms; with the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, with the Negro spiritual; with the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs”. (Lupton 48) While the slave narrative provided the foundational expression for hope in African-American women’s writing, it may be said that Angelou’s autobiographies were the narratives that found appropriate embodiment in her poetry. She moves beyond protest to critique the harsh realities of segregated life in the South. Accordingly Angelou questions the responsibility and guilt involved in the exploitation of the African-Americans,

After Eli Whitney’s gin
Brought to generations’ end
Bartered flesh and broken bones
Did it cleanse you of your sin
Did you ponder?

Now, when farmers bury wheat
And the cow men dump the sweet
Butter down on Davy Jones
Does it sanctify your street
Do you wonder?
Or is guilt your nightly mare
Bucking wake your evenings' share
Of the stilled repair of groans
And the absence of despair
Over yonder? (1-15)

Angelou’s poetry is a personal odyssey of the “caged bird” searching for its freedom and teaching itself to understand the beauty of its existence, not merely in physical terms, but in the spiritual terms of love and integrity.

Angelou has exploited different roles, used several themes and identities to signify multiple layers of oppression and personal history in her poetry. Her belief that one may encounter many defeats, and that one should not be defeated, has helped her overcome the obstacle of constantly being “caged”. The “caged bird” gives way to the “phenomenal woman” by overcoming its obscurity through its association with a strong community of women who provided the needful guidance and education. According to Angelou, a sense of pride is what sustains people when they are enslaved, harassed, humiliated and degraded. Growing up in a segregated, racist South where the white community often gathered outside elementary schools to scream racial slurs at black children, Angelou learned the value of personal strength in seemingly hopeless times.
Her poetry relocates the African-American woman within the self. It complements the search for identity as an African-American woman. "I’m a woman/ Phenomenally/ Phenomenal woman/ That’s me.” ("Phenomenal Woman” line 43-46) Angelou’s poetry intersects with the multiple layers of life in America and comes up with the symbolic identity of the “phenomenal woman” who would inspire every African-American growing up in America. She strives to be the kind of writer who appeals to the nobler sentiments of her readers. This is said best in her poem “Glory Falls” taken from her poetic work _I Shall Not Be Moved_,

From crawling on this
Murky planet’s floor
We soar beyond the
Birds and
Through the clouds
And edge our way from hate
And blind despair and
Bring honor
To our brothers, and to our sisters cheer. (13-21)

Offering hope for the future Angelou uses three objects of nature, “A Rock, A River, A Tree,” from which point she searches the distant past to provide answers for the present. Drawing different races, cultures and religion together, the poem “On the Pulse of Morning” appeals to all Americans to “sing of freedom”.

Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again. (77-81)
Angelou thus traces the journey of the “phenomenal woman” from social injustice and hardships to live again within an awakened community of women who freely express themselves, own their own businesses, and become self-reliant. Angelou’s “sizable body of poetry is relevant to her autobiographical themes”. (Lupton48) and has greatly contributed to her popularity as a contemporary writer. Amongst the 2010 winners of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Angelou says in Conversations, that she dedicates her poetic work to all her “brown, black, beige, yellow, red and white sisters” and attempts with her collection of poetry “to herald the various kinds of beauty of women, some plain, some young, and of all colors” (190). Thus,

The variety of our skin tones
can confuse, bemuse, delight,
brown and pink and beige and purple,
tan and blue and white.

I note the obvious differences
between each sort and type.
but we are more alike, my friends,
than we are unalike. (1-12, 33-36)
Works Cited


<usindh.edu.pk/maya_angelous_poetry.pdf>.