Chapter III

A Study of the “Phenomenal Woman” in Maya Angelou’s Later Poems

First published in 1978, ‘Phenomenal Woman’ taken from the volume of verse And Still I Rise celebrates the strength of a woman. The persona in this poem is perceived to be a strong, confident woman. Lyman B Hagen’s Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet insists that “The woman described is easily matched to the author herself. Angelou is an imposing woman—at least six feet tall. She has a strong personality and a compelling presence” as defined in the poem,

Pretty woman wonder where my secret lies.
I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I’m telling lies.
I say,
It’s in the reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me. (1-13)

Having presented women from the position of being silenced, caged and displaced, Angelou next presents the caged woman’s emergence into the world of work where she pursues economic stability in order to bring her recognition, money and independence. Angelou’s autobiography Gather Together in My Name is concerned with her
process of becoming an adult, emphasizing parenting, personal development and survival in order to develop an intact personal identity as a woman, a phenomenally “phenomenal woman”. Taken from the volume of poems *Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?*, the poem “Weekend glory” encapsulates Angelou’s perseverance in dealing with the emotional, racial economic and relational aspects of her life,

My job at the plant
ain’t the biggest bet,
but I pay my bills
and stay out of debt.

Folks write about me.
They just can’t see
how I work all week
at the factory.
Then get spruced up
and laugh and dance
and turn away from worry
with sassy glance.

They accuse me of livin’
from day to day,
but who are they kiddin’?
So are they.

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.(17-20, 32-49)

Coming from a broken home, undergoing the trauma of being raped at a tender age of eight, the violent death of her attacker that led to her subsequent refusal to speak for five years and an unwed mother at sixteen who decided to have a child out of wedlock in order to explore
her feminity and relieve fears that she may be a lesbian, Angelou’s life
continued to present sufficient substance for both poetry and
autobiography. For example, seeing strong African women like Bertha
Flowers, standing up for themselves within the larger African-American
community and even in relation to the white population, opened
Angelou’s eyes to the idea that she may be fulfilling her dream of
becoming an educated woman and a proud African-American. “In that
atmosphere” she admits, “I came to love my people more” (I Know Why
the Caged Bird Sings, 209).

Mrs. Flowers was one of the few gentlewomen Angelou had ever
known and has remained throughout her life “the measure of what a
human being can be”. (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 91) For
Angelou, under Mrs. Flowers tutelage, formal education became
salvation. According to Mrs. Flowers, words have a “life beyond the
printed page. Words even written words, acquire meaning by being
spoken...Angelou thus represents Mrs. Flowers as bridging the gap
between oral and literary culture” (Bloom Modern Critical
Interpretations 39). Thus, “Mrs. Flowers joined the world of Stamps to
the world of literature, embodied in her person the dreams that shaped
Angelou’s imagination” (39).
There is a sense of having overcome her difficulties in the poem “Phenomenal Woman”, a positivity about it that arises from having successfully fought all the odds against her:

Now you understand
Just why my head’s not bowed.
I don’t shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing,
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It’s in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
the palm of my hand,
The need for my care.
‘Cause I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman.
That’s me (47-61).

Angelou “builds a pride in her blackness with each triumph of strength and perseverance in the white world” (Bloom, *Bio Critiques*). Stepping into the arena of entertainment she finds a mode by which she can reach social equality. Her career as a professional entertainer began on the West Coast, where she performed as a dancer-singer at the Purple Onion cabaret in the early 1950s. While working in this popular cabaret, she was spotted by members of the *Porgy and Bess* cast and invited to audition for the chorus. Upon her return from the play’s 1954-55 tour of Europe and Africa, Angelou transmits her journey into her poetry. While in the poem “For Us, Who Dare Not Dare” she remembers the African fruits,
Taste me fruit
Its juice free-falling from
A mother tree.
Know me
Africa (15-19)

in the poem “London”, Angelou remembers the place as being “queer”,

If I remember correctly,
London is a very queer place.
Mighty queer.
A million miles from
Jungle, and the British
Lion roars in the stone of
Trafalgar Square.
Mighty queer.

Centuries of hate divide St. George’s
Channel and the Gaels,
But plum-cheeked English boys drink
Sweet tea and grow to fight
For their Queen.
Mighty queer. (1-8, 16-21)

Angelou continued to perform at nightclubs throughout the country where she acquired valuable experience. Angelou later joined the Harlem Writers Guild in the late 1950s and met James Baldwin and other important writers. It was during this time that Angelou had the opportunity to hear Dr. Martin Luther King speak. Inspired by his message she decided to become a part of the struggle for civil rights for she too believed and shared his hope for a world that is fair and free. Moreover with original screenplays to her credit, Angelou has also authored and produced television series. Receiving over thirty to fifty honorary degrees and awards, Angelou’s discovery of “her talent arms
her with a means of personally battling racism, and for the first time Angelou has a personal power behind her combative stance” (Bloom, Bio Critiques). The image of Angelou as a “phenomenal woman” rings with confidence and challenge:

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.
(Still I Rise 29-34).

Maya Angelou’s pride in being an African-American is best expressed in her poem “Weekend Glory” taken from the volume Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing. Angelou is so confident about herself that not only is she not frightened but even lectures white Americans on how to enjoy themselves. This is evident in the lines,

If they want to learn how to live life right,
they ought to study me on a Saturday night. (15-16)

Angelou’s concept of woman in her poetry provides an entity that binds together all African-American women in the face of racial, national and other differences. Angelou does bond with other women on a close, personal level but she and the other women of Stamps are unable to affect any major changes in the patriarchy.

“Black women in the later 1930s, although they could influence each other’s lives, had no power to question the social order because the people in power were white and racist. There were no civil-rights laws to protect political dissenters in Arkansas. Were a woman to challenge the system in Stamps,
Arkansas, in the 1930s or 1940s or in the decades to come, she ended up dead” (Lupton 72).

Only years later, when Angelou leaves Stamps and goes to California, does she challenge the patriarchal order by becoming the first African-American female streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Although her body may not be perfect or even attractive she takes pride in her physical existence. “Through poetic verse, education, a long standing appreciation of black history Angelou freed herself from the cage of her own imperfections, insecurities and doubts of self-loathing to find authentic inner peace”. (Bloom, Modern Critical Interpretations 44)

Again although Angelou feels painfully inferior in appearance to her mother, whose beauty was far greater than white Americans, yet her uncle Tommy reassures her “Ritie, don’t worry ‘cause you ain’t pretty. You smart, I swear to God, I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, 67). Angelou’s intelligence more than compensates for her appearance. Once she realizes that African people are beautiful, she feels less insecure about her African features. The “Black is beautiful” cultural movement aimed to dispel the notion that black people’s natural features such as skin color, facial features and hair are inherently ugly. First coined by John Sweat Rock, the movement “Black is Beautiful” asked that men and women stop straightening their hair and attempting to lighten or bleach their skin. The movement was
largely responsible for giving the generation of African-Americans the courage to feel good about who they are and how they look. Through this realization that beauty is not associated with skin color Angelou eventually grows to love her own appearance and learns to appreciate the proclamation that “black is beautiful”. Thus, in the poem “Ain’t That Bad?” taken from the volume And Still I Rise, Angelou elevates that “blackness”,

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.

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?(5-12, 16-22)

Similar to “Phenomenal Woman” in its form and message is “Woman Work” taken from the same volume of work. The two poems bear a resemblance in their praise of woman’s vitality. Although “Woman Work” does not concern the physical appeal of woman, as “Phenomenal Woman” does, it delivers a corresponding message to the endless cycle of everyday chores. The first stanza unravels a long list,
I've got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
Then baby to dry (1-6).

Following a category of tasks, the poet adds four shorter stanzas, which reveal the source of woman’s strength. The woman claims that nature and its powerful elements like the rain, the storm, the wind and snow gives her the strength to endure.

Angelou has often attributed her strength and courage to endure to the healing power of religion. Religion is one of the greatest influences that helped shape Angelou’s life because it served as a mechanism for coping with oppression. “Stepping out” on His word, Angelou affirms her faith in the poem “Just Like Job” from the volume And Still I Rise,

Into the alleys
Into the byways
Into the streets
And the roads
And the highways
Past rumor mongers
And midnight ramblers
Past the liars and the cheaters and the gamblers
On your word
On your word.
On the wonderful word of the Son of God.
I’m stepping out on your word.(40-51)

The importance of the vibrant church language, which influenced Angelou’s writing, is illustrated in Angelou’s assertion that she liked the way the word “Deuteronomy” rolled off her tongue. She says, “The first
poetry I ever knew was the poetry of the gospel songs and the spirituals” (Conversations with Maya Angelou 87). She remembers how the members of the Stamps’ community attributed their ability to endure a day’s heavy toil to the power of religion. “People whose history and future were threatened each day by extinction considered that it was only by divine intervention that they were able to live at all” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”). Attending church was an escape into a different world of ecstasy and joy. When living in Stamps, she often sang solos in the church every Sunday.

In looking at Angelou’s “Caged Bird”, “there exists a thematic unity of subtle racial resistance along with the establishment of pride and identity mainly conveyed through the medium of songs and music”. (Bloom, Modern Critical Interpretations 56) In chapter eighteen with poignant detail Angelou recalls words that moved her at a church revival: “Bye and bye, when the morning comes/when all the saints of God are gathering home/we will tell the story of how to overcome and we’ll understand it better by and bye” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 129). What made this revival enriching and memorable for Angelou was its bringing together a community of African-Americans from all religious backgrounds.
Church sermons that were sung in the form of blues gave African-Americans a means of free expression, and it helped many to survive both emotionally and physically the hardships in their lives. The songs that were sung contain lines that may be understood as secret codes about protests, uprisings and escape. African-American often associate themselves with the people and events from the Bible. Similarly, Angelou associates herself with Job in the poem “Just like Job” when she says,

My screams searched the heavens for Thee.
My God, When my blanket was nothing but dew,
Rags and bones Were all I owned,
I chanted Your Name Just like Job (5-11).

Understanding Maya Angelou’s religious upbringing in the hands of her grandmother and her faith in God is the key to understanding Angelou as an African-American writer and as a poet caged in the racism of “America”, where justice was not “clearly defined”. Taken from Angelou’s poetic work, Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well, the message of disparity runs through in the poem “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

Her southern exposure
black death did befriend

Discover this country
dead centuries cry

Erect noble tablets
where none can decry(1-16)

In addition, Angelou’s love for the church is attributed to her grandmother’s religious devotion. Her belief in God helped her shape her writing and gave her the courage to sing in a caged racist society. She therefore makes a successful transition from the sensitive child narrator of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* who struggles for independence to a woman who is not only strong and courageous but a woman who is both phenomenal and a representative of the African-American women.

In conclusion, one can say that Angelou projects herself as a metaphor of hope and courage by overcoming life’s obstacles through positive means, like courage and determination. Angelou has always seen herself as a “womanist” a term borrowed from Alice Walker, who displays courage and strength of character. Alice Walker, defines “womanist” as someone, “who appreciates and prefers woman’s culture, woman’s emotional flexibility and woman’s strength” (*In Search of Our
*Mother's Gardens*), usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful behavior. By acknowledging herself as a “womanist”, Angelou sets a meaningful lesson to all African-American women to continue to endure, survive and to transform their oppressive existence. According to Crawford, “Womanist” theologians have “consistently attributed the survival of African-American women to their strength or courage in adversity and interpret this strength as hope.” *(Hope in the Holler: A Womanist Theology* xii). And it is this hope that moves Angelou beyond endurance and ultimately gives her the confidence to “sing of freedom”.
Works Cited


