

# BLACK POWER IN MAYA ANGELOU'S "STILL I RISE", "PHENOMENAL WOMAN", AND "WEEKEND GLORY"

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the Black Power's ideas inside the three poems of Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise", "Phenomenal Woman", and "Weekend Glory". Maya Angelou was highly respected as a spokesperson for Blacks and women. The struggle of the author as a powerless Black woman can be seen from Angelou's poems. This article tries to find out in what ways Black power is revealed in Maya Angelou's three poems mentioned above. Moreover, Black power movement concept and figurative language are needed to reveal the idea of Black power in each poem. The analysis shows that there are differences of ideas of Black power in each poem. The Black power idea is the way to survive in the society, the way to express someone's thought, and the ability to accept one's identity as a Black woman. In the end, it can be concluded that the author is a powerful Black woman.

**Keywords:** Poem, Black Power, Powerless, Black woman.

Maya Angelou is one of the most important African-American authors and orators of the twentieth century. She speaks on behalf of her and other African-American slaves who suffered during the black civil war. Many of her works considered as autobiographies because it contained a lot of her own experiences as an African-American woman. She gave a great influence in the field of literature as women's activist and because of that she received various awards associated to what she has done as a feminist. At the age of eight, Angelou had a painful experience for a little girl. She was raped at that age and she also went through a period of muteness. Through the hardship, she begins to stand up one more time and create the "Still I Rise", "Phenomenal Woman", "Weekend Glory" and other poems.

Inside the "Still I Rise", "Phenomenal Woman", and "Weekend Glory", there are some differences and similarities. From the three poems, the differences are the main themes of each poem. In the first poem, "Still I Rise", the theme of this poem is about how a woman confronts her painful history in slavery period and tries to move forward for a better life. In the second poem, "Phenomenal Woman" shares the speaker idea that she is a beautiful woman although she is not considered as a beautiful woman in society. The third poem, "Weekend Glory", shares the speaker's idea about her life experiences as a Black woman and how she can deal with the difficulties for being Black in the society. This article will only discuss the similarities that the three speakers want to share to the readers through the three poems.

This article tries to find out in what ways Black power is revealed in Maya Angelou's three poems, "Still I Rise", "Phenomenal Woman", and "Weekend Glory". The Black Power Movement concept edited by Peniel E. Joseph is needed to reveal and to understand the Black Power inside the three poems. Besides, the figurative language such as metaphor, simile, repetition, hyperbole, symbolism, and imagery will help to find out the deeper meaning of each poem.

## THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

The Black Power movement grew out of the Civil Right Movement that had steadily gained momentum through the 1950s and 1960s. Although not a formal movement, the Black Power movement marked a turning point in Black-White relations in the United States and also in how Blacks saw themselves. At that time, Black people including Black women start to think about their presence and start to respect themselves as a human being. In Maya Angelou's three poems, the speaker shows herself as a worthwhile being, although she is a woman from Black race. In Maya

Angelou's three poems, the speaker shows herself as a worthwhile being, although she is a woman from Black race. In her book, Joseph (2006) stated:

In the 1960s, numerous black women including public housing tenants, welfare mothers, and nuns mobilized outside of, but in the context of, Black Power radicals. These women protested racism, a discriminatory state, and an economic system that kept people impoverished. They called for black pride and demanded power, social rights, and the dignity denied to their communities, their families, and themselves as black women, mothers, and often their families' primary financial providers (p. 81).

From the quotation above, the awareness as Black women arise and make them try to fight the discrimination using their own way. In the poem "Weekend Glory", the speaker shares her thought that she can work well even though she is a Black woman. Although the speaker lives simply, but she can work and live well and proud for being Black. Joseph (2006) also stated:

In the age of rights, antipoverty, and power campaigns, black women in community based and often women-centered organizations, like their female counterparts in nationally known organizations and engendered Black Power through their speech and as participants of tenant councils, welfare rights groups, and a black female religious order (p. 81).

When their consciousness arises, in order to survive, as Black women they create an organization or groups to build up their power together. Whether by choice or circumstance, African-American women have "possessed the spirit of independence," have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another to value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity (Steady, 1981, p. 87). The speaker in these three poems does not only speak about her own sorrow, but the speaker here dares to speak as one of the represent of all the powerless Black women's race. In the poem "Still I Rise", the speaker notes several words such as history, pain, terror, fear, and slave. Those words have a relevance to the position of the speaker as a Black African-American woman. From the quote above, it can be seen that the speaker tries to overcome her painful past as a Black woman. When Black women's survival is at stake, creating independent self-definitions becomes essential to that survival.

Collins (2000) in her book stated:

U.S. Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the "inside" ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, surpass the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality (p. 98).

Black women consciousness here gives a lot of changes for their lives. This group treatment potentially renders each individual African-American woman invisible as fully human. These ways of life have found wide support among African-American women. Some changes can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual Black woman's consciousness. Black women become 'smarter' to deal with their problem regarding the discrimination of color and gender problems. As the Black women consciousness arises, they need the power to be free from the gender and race discrimination that happen to them. This article is going to relate the concept of the Black power movement with Maya Angelou's three poems to find out the forms of power that appear inside the three poems.

## **FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE**

In this article, the figurative language is also needed in order to find out the deeper meaning idea of Black power in each poem. Perrine (1978) noted that figurative language is "language using figures of speech; is language that cannot be taken literally" (p. 605). Among the figurative language, this article only uses metaphor, simile, repetition, hyperbole, and imagery. The metaphor states a fact or draws a verbal picture by the use of comparison. It is a comparison made between things that are essentially not alike. In metaphor, "literal meaning is often patently absurd" (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 5). In the poem "Still I Rise", Angelou (1994) uses metaphor, "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide" (p. 164). In this line, Angelou shows the comparison between Black ocean and herself. Metaphor is needed to analyze how the speaker reveals her identity as a Black woman inside of the poem. In simile, "the comparison is expressed by the use of some word or phrase, such as like, as, than, similar to, resembles, or seems" (Perrine, 1978, p. 605). In the

poem “Still I Rise”, Angelou (1994) uses simile in the following lines, “But still, like dust, I’ll rise” (p. 163). Angelou compares her life to dust in this line. She uses simile as an example to depict who she is and what she will do.

Besides, in the poem “Phenomenal Woman” and “Still I Rise”, Angelou uses some repetition inside of those poems. According to Shetty (2000), repetition is “a figure of speech in which a word or a group of words is repeated for poetic effect” (p. 135). Angelou (1994) uses repetition in the “Phenomenal Woman”, “I’m a woman / Phenomenally / Phenomenal woman” (p. 130). Angelou uses repetition several times in the word ‘phenomenal’. It emphasizes that she is phenomenal because of her different qualities from other women. Moreover, Angelou also uses hyperbole in the “Phenomenal Woman”. According to Perrine (1978), hyperbole is “simply exaggeration but exaggeration in the service of truth” (p. 646). Angelou (1994) uses hyperbole in the following lines, “And to a man / The fellows stand or / Fall down on their knees” (p. 130). These are all exaggerations to show her confidence as a woman and to prove to the reader that she has strong personality. Furthermore, she also uses imagery in the “Phenomenal Woman”. According to Perrine (1978), imagery may be defined as “the representation through language of sense experience” (p. 594). Angelou (1994) uses visual imagery in the following line, “The sun of my smile / The ride of my breast / The grace of my style” (p. 131). Angelou uses visual imagery to give the reader a sense of what the speaker looks like. It is used to portray a proud and confident woman when she writes the description of the women.

### **MAYA ANGELOU’S IDEAS ABOUT BLACK POWER AS SEEN IN HER THREE POEMS**

This section is about how Maya Angelou expresses the idea of Black Power in her three poems, “Still I Rise”, “Phenomenal Woman”, and “Weekend Glory”. The three poems will be analyzed using Black Power Movement concept and figurative language such as metaphor, simile, repetition, hyperbole, and imagery.

#### **Black Power in “Still I Rise”**

In the poem “Still I rise”, Black power is the way to survive in the society that Angelou uses as a Black African-American woman. The speaker needs to change her mindset and show the others that she is no longer a powerless Black woman. Oppression describes any unjust situation where, “systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (Collins, 2000, p. 4). Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity are the forms of oppression that happen in the United States. In this poem, the speaker shows that she will never give up to rise and will move forward for a better life for her and other Black African-American women. She fights really hard in order to have her right as a human being. She has a general belief that she has a right to secure power to make critical decisions affecting her life. The idea of Black power in this poem is conveyed through the powerful diction and some figurative language that the speaker uses.

Firstly, in the first stanza, the speaker shows her power that she can overcome her painful history in the past and survive in the society. In the first stanza, the speaker tries to survive even though she is always discriminated by others because of her race and gender:

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 (Angelou, 1994, p. 163).

In the first and second lines, “You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies” (Angelou, 1994, p. 163), the speaker reveals her past during the slavery period. There is also a sense of lies and silent discrimination that surrounds the history of powerless African-American women. The speaker shows that the oppressors try to make her look bad and worthless as a human. The speaker here shows her condition and her power to survive in the rough society as a Black woman. This can be seen through the simile in the line four. Simile here shows the speaker’s powerless condition in her real life. As a Black African-American woman, the oppressors always look her as dust that has no value and means nothing in society. The oppressors make Black

African-American women think that they do not have any value as human. However, the speaker says that the dust will rise, indicating, although the history has been difficult, the spirit will prevail. The speaker tries to show that the dust also can rise from the ground. Although she faces a lot of painful condition, but that oppressed condition will make her gains new power and hope to rise above her difficulties. She shows to others how determined she is to survive against all the oppression and discrimination that she faces.

In addition, the speaker's idea to survive in the society also can be seen in the second stanza through another simile that she uses in this poem. In this stanza, she believes that she is not a powerless woman. The speaker asks a question to the oppressor:

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 (Angelou, 1994, p. 163).

In this stanza, the speaker attitude as a confident, sassy, African-American woman is out of the norm for society. The simile can be seen in the following line, "Cause I walk like I've got oil wells" (Angelou, 1994, p. 163). Simile here is used to portray her pride as a Black African-American woman. Oil is very expensive, a natural resource that is very precious, and sought after. By comparing her dignity and pride to an oil well, the speaker states that her pride as a Black woman is really important. No one can purchase it, and it is worth more than anything material, like oil. Historically African-American families have been economically exploited and politically disenfranchised within the U.S. political economy. This neither means that all African-Americans have been poor, nor that most are today. On the other hand it is very different from the message inside the poem. The speaker shares the idea that she is rich and the one who oppresses her faces a miserable condition. This stanza displays the confidence of being Black and the insecurity of being the oppressor.

Moreover, the speaker shows her Black power idea to survive and also to reveal her self-confidence as a Black woman to the oppressor through the metaphor that the speaker uses in the poem. She uses metaphor to show her identity as a Black African-American woman. In the line thirty-three, the speaker uses metaphor, "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide" (Angelou, 1994, p. 164). The word 'black' in the poem shows the identity of the speaker that she is a Black African-American woman and how she is proud of her identity. The word ocean means a very large expanse of sea ("Ocean," 2012). The speaker in this poem uses the metaphor of 'black ocean' to show that there are a lot of other powerless Black African-American women and she is one of them. The 'black ocean' here also means that the vast amount of Black women break free and scatter wide and far through out the world.

Consequently, her power to survive in the society as a Black African-American woman also can be seen in the eighth stanza. In this last stanza, the speaker shows that she will survive no matter what the condition is. This can be seen through the repetition in the line forty to forty-three. She uses repetition in order to emphasize and strengthen her point that she will never stop to stand above her problems. The speaker uses repetition in the following lines, "I rise / I rise / I rise" (Angelou, 1994, p. 164). The speaker emphasizes her enthusiasm and inner strength. She tells others that she refuses to be put down; no matter the obstacle in front of her, the result will always be the same. She repeats those words in order to show how determined she is to fight against the discrimination and oppression, and also she wants to inspire other people to never give up struggling for obtaining their rights.

### **Black Power in "Phenomenal Woman"**

Like the previous poem, "Still I Rise", the idea of Black power also can be seen in the second poem, "Phenomenal Woman". In the poem "Phenomenal Woman", Black Power is the way to express someone's thought and idea about herself as a Black woman. All African-American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely derogates women of African descent. U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female. For individual women, the particular experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can "stimulate a distinctive consciousness

concerning their experiences and society overall” (Collins, 2000, p. 24). The experiences of African-American women provide the speaker with a unique angle of vision concerning Black woman. It is more likely for Black women, as members of an oppressed and powerless group, to have critical insights into the condition of the oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures. The speaker as a Black woman can understand the condition when someone is oppressed because of the different color and gender. The speaker here also tries to change the idea that woman is a weak creature without any right to speak out in public. In this poem, she points out that even she is a Black and a woman; she can become a ‘phenomenal’ being in the society. Normally a Black woman will not have courage to speak out her mind. However in this poem, the speaker dares to express her idea for being a woman and she also shows her self-confidence and power as a phenomenal Black woman. The speaker here also uses diction and some figurative of language that can show the speaker’s Black power as a Black African-American woman.

In the first stanza, the speaker shows her power through the confession that she is special. This can be seen through the visual imagery that the speaker uses:

Pretty women 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 (Angelou, 1994, p. 130).

In the second line, she shows her black power idea that she can express her thought freely about herself and other people. This can be seen through the visual imagery, “I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size” (Angelou, 1994, p. 130). She uses visual imagery so people can portray her image as someone who can accept herself well despite her color and race. Another imagery that the speaker uses in the following lines, “The span of my hips / The stride of my step / The curl of my lips” (Angelou, 1994, p. 130). The woman is described as a woman who has a self-confidence and strong personality.

Besides, the speaker also tries to express her power and self-confidence as a Black woman in this poem using metaphor. She gives the idea that she is no longer a powerless Black woman. She uses metaphor in the line twenty-two, “It’s the fire in my eyes” (Angelou, 1994, p. 130). Fire is the phenomenon of combustion manifested in light, flame, and heat or another definition is burning passion (“Fire,” 2012). In this poem, the fire here shows the speaker’s passion that can attract a lot of people to pay attention to her. It shows her self-confidence for being Black woman. Powerless Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and oppose the dominant social injustice. They believe that they have the rights to show how determined they are to end the oppression and discrimination that happen to them. Their strong confidence can give the power to the speaker and other Black African-American women to voice their feeling and aim for a better condition.

In addition, the speaker expresses her Black power idea that she is ‘phenomenal’ and ‘different’ in the poem. It can be seen through the repetition that she uses in every stanza of the poem. She uses repetition to emphasize that she is a phenomenal woman:

I’m a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman.  
That’s me (Angelou, 1994, p. 130-131).

The speaker repeats this sentence in the end of each stanza to emphasize her power that no matter what people think about her, she will never lose her confidence that she is a phenomenal Black woman. During the slavery period, Black women cannot consider as beautiful women since they have “dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair” (Collins, 2000, p. 89). In the poem “Phenomenal Woman”, the speaker as a Black African-American woman does not think herself as a beautiful woman, but she can accept herself as a Black woman and even she is proud of her identity. She tries to show that beauty is not the most precious thing that woman should have in the life. She emphasizes that self-confidence is more important for someone to be able to accept herself thoroughly. Through repetition, the speaker dares to express her thought that she is a special being and she feels proud of it.

Moreover, in the second stanza, the speaker expresses her idea of Black power that she is a woman with a strong personality. The idea can be seen through hyperbole that the speaker uses in the poem. The speaker here uses hyperbole to strengthen her Black power in this poem. She uses hyperbole in this poem to show her power and authority over the one who underestimate her, “And to a man / The fellows stand or / Fall down on their knees” (Angelou, 1994, p. 130). She uses hyperbole in order to show her power as a Black woman. She shows that she can conquer men with her strong personality. She gives the idea that the man as the oppressor will come to heel to her as the oppressed and Black woman. Black power encompasses general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in, cope with, and resist the differential treatment. The speaker shows her Black power to express her thought as a Black woman. The speaker experiences as the oppressed may put her in a position to see things differently and she feels that she has the right to live normally like other people. Through these parts of the poem, it can be seen that the speaker believes that the oppressor will admit her presence in the society as a Black woman.

### **Black power in “Weekend Glory”**

Like the previous poem, “Still I Rise” and “Phenomenal Woman”, the idea of Black power also can be seen in the poem “Weekend Glory”. In the poem “Weekend Glory”, Black power here is someone’s ability to accept her life regardless of her condition. This poem contains the speaker’s point of view about her life and work as a Black African-American woman. Through the diction and the figurative language that the speaker uses, it can be seen her power and her pride as a Black. Whether they are middle class or working class, black women experience racism. However, even she is a Black woman, the speaker of the poem here still feels proud about her identity. Under slavery, U.S. Black women worked without pay and have their family privacy routinely violated. If there is an idea that real men work and real women take care of families, then African-American women suffer from the poor ideas concerning gender. In particular, Black women become less “feminine,” because they need to work outside the home, work for pay and they also need to compete with men. This condition shows how powerless Black women during the slavery era. It is difficult for Black women to face their oppressed condition in the society.

In the first stanza, the speaker shows her Black power idea that although she is a Black woman, she is able to work and live well:

Some clichty folks  
don't know the facts,  
posin' and preenin'  
and puttin' on acts,  
stretchin' their backs (Angelou, 1994, p. 206).

In the first stanza, the speaker shows her power and self-confidence that her life is much better than people who oppress and discriminate her. This can be seen through visual imagery in the first stanza. The speaker uses visual imagery to make the reader imagine a group of women, which cannot be compared to her as a Black woman. In here, the speaker gives the sense that those women are a group of people who used to underestimate her as a Black African-American woman. The speaker here tries to share the idea that her life is much better than the one who always underestimates her.

Besides, in the last stanza, the speaker expresses her Black power that she has inner strength and can overwhelm the difficulties that she faces as a powerless Black African-American woman. This can be seen through the metaphor that the speaker uses. She uses metaphor to show her Black power in the poem. She puts metaphor in the following lines, “My life ain't heaven / but it sure ain't hell” (Angelou, 1994, p. 207). The speaker tries to compare her life with heaven and also hell. She knows very well the difficulties that she has to face because of her color and gender. She points out that it is not easy to live as a Black woman; they need to fight hard in order to survive in the society. The speaker thinks that the conditions of her life not only make her more receptive to rights and power claims, but also motivate her and many other low-income women to act. Through these lines, the speaker also wants to share that she can find happiness even though she is only a Black woman. This condition makes the speaker a powerless being anymore; she shows her power and confidence as a Black woman. Regardless the condition that the speaker faces

because of her identity as a Black woman, she believes that her life is better than those people who look down on her.

From the discussion, the speakers' condition as powerless Black women cannot stop them to fight for their rights. The speakers need to face a lot of difficulties because of their race and gender. However, through the three poems, the speakers share the idea that they can survive in the society, express their idea, and accept their life as a Black woman. This shows their powerless condition is a new source of power for them to fight against all the injustice that they face as a Black African-American woman and to have a normal life like other people.

## CONCLUSION

This article discusses the Black power inside the three poems of Maya Angelou, each poem shows different idea of Black power. Normally, Black women always have been seen as a powerless being, since they do not have the freedom, the rights to voice their feeling, or to live normally like other people. Their presence is always considered unimportant and they need to face a lot of difficulties to survive in the society. However, this is different from Maya Angelou's point of view. Angelou here also a powerless Black African-American woman, but she can change her powerless condition into something powerful through her poems. Angelou's three poems, "Still I Rise", "Phenomenal Woman", and "Weekend Glory" show her power as a powerless Black African-American woman. Based on the analysis on her three poems, it can be seen that the idea of Black power in each poem is different from one another. Although it has different ideas about Black power, the three poems contain the speaker's confidence and strong personality as a powerless Black African-American woman.

In the first poem, "Still I Rise", the idea of Black power is the way to survive as a Black woman in the society. Using this poem she shows that she is no longer a powerless Black woman and she is able to stand above her problems and difficulties. In addition, the speaker also shows her power in the second poem, "Phenomenal Woman". In this poem, the idea of Black power is the way to express the speaker's idea about herself as a Black woman. This poem contains the speaker's idea that even though she is a powerless being, she is still a phenomenal woman. The speaker shows that the ideal beauty in the society cannot be compared to her confidence and her pride as a Black African-American woman. Lastly, the speaker also shares her Black power in the third poem "Weekend Glory". In this poem, the idea of Black power is the speaker's ability to accept her life regardless her condition as a Black African-American woman. The speaker shows her position as a powerless Black woman in terms of job. She shows that she can do better and live well even though she is just a powerless Black woman.

Overall, from the three poems it can be seen that the three speakers have the Black power to fight against the injustice as Black women. They show that they are not powerless Black women and they are against the oppression and discrimination that happen to them and other Black African-American women. The three speakers use each poem as a media to voice their feeling for being a powerless Black woman. They want to give the idea that although they are always seen as powerless being, they can create a better change for their life and overcome the difficulties due to their different color and gender.

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