

A Manifestation of Women Writings in the Context of Maya Angelou's Selected Works

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Abstract

This study explores the stigmatization of the female body and women in American literature, highlighting how contemporary women's writing challenges traditional gender norms. In many literary works, women are often portrayed as passive, objectified, and devoid of agency. The aim of this study is to re-establish the importance and role of women in literature for the betterment of society. To achieve this, Maya Angelou's work, specifically *Still I Rise*, has been selected as a case study. Angelou's influential writing sheds light on women's experiences and the impact of trauma on their bodies. Through her work, Angelou challenges the conventional portrayal of women in literature and emphasizes the significance of self-love and resilience in the face of adversity. Employing a qualitative approach, the study conducts content analysis to examine the themes and imagery in Angelou's work. The findings will be discussed in relation to the traditional concept of women in literature and how contemporary women's writing defies these notions. Ultimately, by highlighting women's experiences and the impact of trauma on their bodies, this study endeavours to challenge traditional gender norms and foster a more inclusive and equitable society.

Keywords: American writings, female body, women's writing, trauma, Maya Angelou

Contribution/Originality: This study aims to provide insights into the role of women in literature and their potential to inspire social change and promote gender equality.

Introduction

Women have been victims of body shaming and various forms of bullying, as mentioned earlier. The exploration of trauma fiction in American literature has often resulted in unpleasant experiences for readers (Schielein, 2020). In light of this, the present study aims to evaluate how contemporary American literature challenges the treatment of women and the female body.

Maya Angelou's ground breaking novel, *I Still Rise*, specifically addresses this issue (Angelou, 2013). Scholars believe that this literary work reflects the author's personal experiences of past sexual assaults during her childhood. The line "You may trod me in the very dirt" is seen as evidence of these assumptions, suggesting that the phrase "very dirt" represents the degradation inflicted upon her by the perpetrator. To guide the study, a set of research questions has been formulated. The chosen research methodology is secondary qualitative research. Finally, the study highlights the significance of the research in the context of contemporary America.

Trauma and Female body

The influence of women in literature spans across different spectrums, both in the present and throughout history. Trauma can have a profound impact on an individual's life, and many authors utilize literature as a means of exploring and expressing this impact. Culture is the totality of a set of belief system, bequeathed ideas, norms and values which constitute the common bases of generally agreed social action (John, 2021). The female body has long been a subject of exploration in literature, with authors delving into themes such as sexuality, objectification, and the female experience. In literature, the female body often serves as a symbol to explore larger themes and issues. For instance, in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Sethe's scarred back symbolizes the physical and emotional trauma she endured as a slave. Similarly, Sylvia Plath's poem *Lady Lazarus* employs the speaker's body as a metaphor for her emotional anguish and suffering. Sexual trauma, particularly, is a prevalent theme in literature that delves into the female experience. Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* depicts the rape and murder of the main character, Susie Salmon, and examines the repercussions of this trauma on Susie and her family. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the character Offred is subjected to bearing children for a powerful couple, which can be interpreted as a form of sexual trauma. As mentioned earlier, women and the female body have been treated passively and criticized in the past. Additionally, the contributions of women to literature and society have been consistently ignored. Female writers often depict their physical suffering and trauma in their works, reflecting the impact it has on their thoughts and experiences. These creations often portray the suffering

endured by survivors. The treatment of women's bodies in literature can result in severe trauma and indirectly contribute to female depression (Ahmadi, 2021).

As mentioned earlier, women and the female body have been treated passively. Maya Angelou's poetry collection *Still I Rise* explores themes of trauma and the female body. The collection includes poems such as *Still I Rise*, *Phenomenal Woman*, and *Caged Bird*, which address the impact of trauma on individuals and society. In *Still I Rise*, Angelou portrays the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, including experiences of trauma. She celebrates the power of individuals to rise above challenges, emphasizing the importance of self-love and self-respect in coping with trauma. Similarly, in *Phenomenal Woman*, Angelou celebrates the beauty and strength of women, highlighting historical objectification and commodification of the female body. She encourages women to embrace their bodies and celebrate their unique identities through self-acceptance and self-love.

In *Caged Bird*, Angelou uses the metaphor of a bird trapped in a cage to explore the experience of trauma and confinement. She explores into the impact of trauma on the psyche, revealing how individuals can become trapped by their fears and insecurities. As a child, Angelou acquired valuable insights into navigating life as a young black girl in a society dominated by white individuals. In her pursuit of acceptance, she resorted to dyeing her hair blonde, hoping that conforming to the appearance of a white girl would lead to a better existence. Throughout her experiences, Angelou courageously documented her struggles, capturing the depths of her sorrow and illuminating the harsh realities faced by black individuals. In her poignant expressions, she revealed the profound impact of racial discrimination.

.....wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten?...Then they would understand why I had never picked up a southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother..... had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair. (Angelou, 1969:2)

However, she also emphasizes the power of the human spirit to break free from these confines and reach new heights. Maya Angelou's work in *Still I Rise* powerfully and evocatively explores themes of trauma and the female body, celebrating the resilience and strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Maya Angelou's writings prominently reflect the cultural differences she experienced within American society. Autobiographies and interviews reveal that racism also influenced the sexual assaults faced by African girls in the American context. The inclusion of trauma fiction in literature has resulted in unpleasant experiences for readers, which is unacceptable. In her poem *Still I Rise*, Maya Angelou portrays perseverance in the face of extreme adversity. The poem addresses the oppression and suffering endured by black communities, particularly black women, while exploring fortitude and tenacity in the face of tyranny. Angelou also addresses the historical persecution of African-Americans, expressing her strong desire to resist becoming a target of such persecution. She opposes anyone who would subjugate or hinder her progress. Rather than appearing defeated with *bowed head and lowered eyes*, she maintains her confidence and resilience. There is a pressing need to change the stigma and re-establish the importance of women in literature, as it is crucial for the well-being of society. According to Lacan's viewpoint, trauma occurs during the recurrence of a past traumatic experience. Thus, the feeling of trauma can haunt individuals who have experienced sexual assaults, even in similar occurrences, until their death. Previous studies have extensively examined the situation of women, and Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* serves as an example. It vividly portrays the destructive legacy of black women during the American Civil War and is considered a remarkable work in this field.

This study will conduct a secondary qualitative analysis by examining ongoing research articles and novels on the treatment of the female body and women in modern American literature. Taking inspiration from Pollock et al.'s (2020) study on the stigmatization of women in literature, a deductive approach will be employed to scientifically investigate this topic. The study will adopt an interpretive philosophy to strategically explore the subject matter. Additionally, the positivism philosophy discussed in Wei et al.'s (2021) work has influenced the present study. In terms of research design, the descriptive type used by Van (2019) and its effective conclusions have influenced the present study to choose a descriptive research design.

At the age of sixteen, Angelou experienced pregnancy and gave birth shortly after her graduation from Missouri High School in San Francisco. Her challenging upbringing greatly impacted her understanding of the struggles faced by African-American women, particularly those who had endured the trauma of sexual assault. As a result, she emerged as a prominent figure in the black female activism movement. Although some critics have voiced concerns about the apparent simplicity of her writing, Angelou responded to these critiques by asserting: "If that cannon, that body of literature written largely by white men, acknowledges my work, then well and good, I accept this honour" (Angelou, 1969:7).

The secondary research analysis will involve considering various data and novels related to the topic. Contemporary women's writing in American literature will be particularly important as a source of literature. Data collection will be conducted through digital platforms, primarily using Google Scholar. This study recognizes the significance of literature published in contemporary women's writing in American literature as a valuable resource. The exploration of trauma and the female body in literature has the potential to bring about significant changes in society's perception of women. Through literature, authors can shed light on women's experiences, highlighting their struggles, triumphs, and challenging societal norms that marginalize them. By exploring the impact of trauma on the female body, authors can also raise awareness about the effects of sexual assault and other forms of abuse, thereby improving conditions for survivors. Contemporary American literature has played a vital role in challenging the portrayal of women, both in the present and future. Works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* have powerfully and evocatively explored the themes of trauma and the female body. These works have created greater awareness of the challenges women face and the significance of their voices in society.

Maya Angelou's autobiographical works have significantly contributed to raising awareness of the impact of sexual assault on the mental and behavioural development of children. Her writings shed light on how trauma shapes one's identity and worldview, while also highlighting the power of resilience and the potential for healing. Angelou's accounts have been influential in creating

greater understanding of these issues. They inspire future authors to present women as integral members of society and to challenge societal norms that marginalize them. Through literature, society can be encouraged to embrace diversity, foster inclusivity, and empower those who have been marginalised.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Maya Angelou's exploration of trauma and the female body in her literature emphasizes the significance of women in the literary field and highlights the impact of discrimination and oppression on individuals and society. Her works challenge patriarchal structures that have historically marginalized and silenced women, showcasing the resilience and strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Through her autobiographical novels and poetry collections, Angelou gives voice to the experiences of trauma and discrimination that women have encountered, demonstrating how these experiences can shape one's identity and perspective. Her writing empowers women to embrace their unique identities and celebrate their bodies, confronting the objectification and commodification of the female form.

Angelou's work also emphasizes the need to eradicate discrimination in all its forms, as it can result in trauma and perpetuate cycles of oppression. Literature possesses the power to shape our understanding of the world and influence our attitudes and behaviors, making it crucial for writers to exercise this power responsibly. Maya Angelou's exploration of trauma and the female body in her literature showcases the potency of storytelling in confronting past injustices and envisioning a more equitable future.

Through her autobiographical novels, poetry, and other works, Angelou amplifies the voices of those who have been silenced and marginalized. She invites us to bear witness to their experiences and comprehend the profound impact of trauma on the human psyche and spirit. Angelou's work challenges us to confront the systemic inequalities and social hierarchies that have historically oppressed women and people of color. By highlighting the objectification, commodification, and use of the female body as a tool for domination and control, she brings attention to the urgent need for greater social and political equality.

At the same time, Angelou's work celebrates the resilience and strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Through her writing, she emphasizes the importance of self-love, self-acceptance, and self-respect as a means of coping with trauma and overcoming the obstacles that stand in our way. Ultimately, Maya Angelou's exploration of trauma and the female body in her literature is a powerful call to action. By amplifying the voices of those who have been silenced and marginalized, she inspires us to rise up and create a world in which all individuals are treated with dignity and respect. Her work challenges us to confront the injustices of the past and work towards a more just and equitable future, one in which the human spirit can soar and all individuals can reach their full potential.

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