



WHAT MAKES BLACK WOMAN WRITER MAYA ANGELOU THE PHENOMENAL WOMAN?

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Introduction

Maya Angelou, in recent times, has not just remained a famous writer of African American literature but a much sought after speaker on the academic circles and a Wisdom Guru whose advice on life, relationships and other aspects of living is appreciated by millions of her fans.

Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with deeper meaning.

This human voice belongs to Dr. Maya Angelou, the celebrated poet, biographer and an influential voice of the modern times. She truly wears many feathers in her cap. Apart from being an eminent poet; she is also a memoirist, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, actress, singer, dancer, and first female black director of Hollywood, historian, and a Civil Rights activist. She was born on April 4th, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. It was in Stamps, her paternal grandmother's place in Arkansas in the South of America that she got to learn the ubiquitous racial discrimination, in rural America. At the same time, she also imbibed the unshakeable faith and values of a traditional African-American family, community, and culture. So far, she has published six autobiographies, five books of essays, several books of poetry and a number of plays. A few movies and television shows are also attributed to her. She has received many awards and over thirty honorary doctoral degrees. In subsequent years, Angelou gained reputation as a skilled actress and dancer. In the mid to late 1950s, the *Harlem Writers' Guild* was instrumental in developing her writing skills and shaped her literary ambitions. In the early years of 1960 Angelou championed Fidel Castro's rise to power in Cuba. Her story got published in the Cuban journal, *Revolucion*. She is a politically cognizant writer. In September 1960, she was moved to watch Fidel Castro's exuberantly warm public hug of Soviet head of state, Nikita Khrushchev in New York, where both men were attending a session of the United Nations. She displays her inimitable style of writing, in her later comments in her third biography, *The Heart of A Woman*:

The Russians were O.K. Of course, Castro never had called himself white, so he was O.K. from the git. Anyhow ... as black people often said, 'Wasn't no Communist country that put my grandpappa in slavery. Wasn't

no Communist lynched my poppa or raped my mamma.
(Angelou: 119)

This shows the depth of her understanding and analysis. Angelou also became an enthusiastic activist and involved herself expansively in the Civil Rights movement, helping Malcolm X build his Organization of African American Unity and serving as northern coordinator for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As a Civil Rights activist she had worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King Junior and Malcolm X.

Maya Angelou is chiefly recognized for her biographies where she displays the rare frankness of uninhibitedly sharing her life as she lived it. The first volume of her series of autobiographies, *Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) brought her international recognition and acclaim and is widely taught in schools. Carol E. Neubauer has written in *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*,

By 1975, Angelou had become recognized not only as a spokesperson for blacks and women, but also for all people who are committed to raising the moral standards of living in the United States.
(Neubauer: 8)

I: Who is A Phenomenal Woman? Definition and Discussion.

As to defining the question of who is a Phenomenal Woman, one can have a range of answers. A phenomenal woman is a woman who has come up the hard way, despite the odds of her life. These are women who in the face of their shortcomings and regardless of the tide being against them, have sailed along and against the tide of life, heroically. A phenomenal woman is a great woman who faces the challenges of life in an extraordinarily brave manner. These challenges can be in the form of, poverty, illiteracy, racism, marginalization, discrimination. The reasons can be copious. Maya Angelou suffered due either for her skin color or for her being a woman, or both. Her suffering was twofold. Due to their being the fairer sex these challenges became more taxing on them. These women also undergo the trials and difficulties of failed relationships, struggling alone or some other kinds of social or economic hardships. A blogger while explaining the difference between the various standards of requirement for being a phenomenal woman, has explained beautifully, in her blog named, *Maya Angelou and Moroccan Phenomenal Woman*,

What does not kill a woman makes her phenomenal.

For a woman being phenomenal does not come easy. To become one she must go through agonizing experiences. She doesn't become a phenomenal woman over night but has to spend unbearably painful and protracted periods of time, for this. Maya Angelou, who prefers to be called Dr. Maya Angelou by her readers and audience, has gone through ghastly experiences in her life. Abandonment as a child, separation of and from the parents, being reared in harsh circumstances of rural South America, continuous dislocations, loss of self esteem after her abuse at the tender age of eight and the resultant trauma, inability to find her roots, loss of confidence in one's self, problems of having a set of unconventional parents, doubts about her sexuality, being an unwed mother, bitterly harsh struggles for earning a livelihood, failed

relationships and having to put up with the shocking loss of people especially the two leaders who were waging a war with the White racist society, and most of all, having to undergo and suffer humiliatingly a callous and insensitive racist society and behavior, right from her childhood.

She has been criticized for bringing this ugly truth out of the closet, where in the name of family honor, such heinous acts are hidden and rapist monsters go scot free. Our country too needs to talk about this child abuse issue openly and there is a need of debate on the issue. Even in the American society of the time, it was shocking to hear someone speak openly about it and for the same reason there was a demand for a ban on her first book of biography. Nevertheless, this book is now considered in the category of the classics. Her decision to state the truth as it is, has proved fruitful and given a relief to the victims of such abuse and to the NGOs working on such issues.

She illustrates how the feelings of guilt, remorse and pain engulf the victims of Child Sexual Abuse or CSA

When I was a young girl, I would read Shakespearian sonnets. At one point I thought Shakespeare was a Black Girl... a Black American Girl in the South. I had been sexually abused when I was young, and I stopped talking altogether from the time I was 7 till the time I was about 13. At the time, I thought everyone could look at me and see that a man had abused me, and that they thought I had liked it.

[Maya Angelou: <http://thoughteconomics.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/why-we-write.html>]

In fact Maya Angelou has been a pioneer in penning her courageous thoughts about such unfortunate yet very crucial issues relating to young women and their safety in the society. She has stated that, she wanted to tell the whole world about it as she wanted to bring this heinous issue out into the open and give hope and strength to the victims and most importantly take them out of their self inflicted huge guilt about the rape. Through the narration of her own personal story, Maya has said, she wanted to tell the victims that, it is the rapist who is the criminal of the worst sort and not the victim. Our orthodox society puts the onus even for this kind of abuse on women! But Maya Angelou, the Phenomenal Woman, has tried to change the pattern of societal taboos and pressures on the childhood rape victims. She has been successful in giving hope to the brave survivors of the rape crime. As stated earlier, she has been criticized for the graphic details of the rape story, yet her first biography has attained the status of a classic. This for the reason of her discussion of deep personal and intimate problems, with an objective attitude.

Following are few of the reasons that make Maya Angelou the Phenomenal woman of our times.

II: Huge Achievements in Writing Career Despite Several Odds

This was a huge accomplishment on behalf of Maya Angelou, the girl from the most unlikely of circumstances and communities to achieve this feat and also from the most unlikely of places, that of rural Stamps from Arkansas in South America and from a most unlikely of the situations too; as the Black girl child was also a victim of sexual abuse. She had come out as a winner out of the worst sort of humiliation a human mind and body could suffer; rape. She suffered this trauma at a very tender age. Normally victims of such horrible crimes never forgive themselves; but Maya did and advises others to do the same. Her childhood rape became a

metaphor for the coming years in her life and career as a writer. When asked how she could continue to love herself despite being a victim of abuse as often is the case, her reply, in an interview to 'teentalkingcircles' website, was as follows:

But what I learned to do many years ago was to forgive myself. It is very important for every human being to forgive herself or himself because if you live, you will make mistakes - it is inevitable. But once you do and you see the mistake then you forgive yourself and say, Well, if I'd known better I'd have done better,

She went mute after the shock of her rape, stopped speaking for years but the written word, the books, helped her come out. Talking about the power of the written word, 'In *A History of Reading*, writer of famous trilogy of books about history of language, writing and reading, Steven Roger Fischer says,

"Today's white-collar worker spends more time reading than eating, drinking, grooming, travelling, socializing or on general entertainment and sport – that is, five to eight hours of each working day. (Only sleep appears to claim as much time.) The computer and Internet? Both are reading revolutions." He continues to explain that, "...reading embraces so much more than work or web. What music is to the spirit, reading is to the mind. Reading challenges, empowers, bewitches, enriches. We perceive little black marks on white paper or PC screen and they move us to tears, open up our lives to new insights and understandings, inspire us, organize our existences and connect us with all creation.... Surely there can be no greater wonder?"

[Steven Fischer: thoughteconomics.blogspot.uk]

That is how powerful and how significant the written word remains even today. Maya became a voracious reader herself since childhood, and the power of the written word was understood by her perfectly. She enumerates how she came to identify her own self with the written word or literature. The art of storytelling, Maya Angelou believes, is used to encourage the new generation to understand something to allow them to step-forward without going back, without having to repeat everything. This is the basis of Aesop's tales, as well, she informs. Story telling lets people make their decisions in the light of mistakes of the previous generation and helps, them to be cautiously careful in their choices, she affirms.

She reached the height of her fame when President Bill Clinton invited her for writing and reciting the first inaugural poem in decades, in 1993. She was only the second poet after Robert Frost to get this highest honor. For this great feat, she has been termed, Black people's 'Poet Laureate'. J. A. Avant analyses her move upwards saying,

Angelou may rank as a poet of moderate ability, but her poetry is praised for its honesty and for a moving sense of dignity. Angelou is consistently understandable, enlightening, and entertaining. Her personal readings of her poetry are moving events and greeted with great enthusiasm. Angelou plays an audience masterfully and her delivery enhances the most simple rhyme. It is little wonder she inspires novices; she makes the difficult seem simple and touching. This in itself is an accomplishment reflecting more than moderate ability.

(Avant: 3329)

With this event, she crossed, 'the bridge' where Black artists are liked generally only by the Black people. Now even the Whites began feeling proud to be among her admirers. Recently after the passing away of great anti-Apartheid leader Nelson Mandela, her poem *His Day Is Done*, was sent on behalf of American State Department to the South African people as a tribute. This poem has also been quickly translated into fifteen languages and has spread throughout the world. This single recent event is proof enough of how deeply penetrated an effect Maya Angelou has been able to make not just in her country United States but all over the world. She had met him the first time, when she was in Cairo in the 1960's. A report in The Guardian on 7 Dec, 2013, reports what she spoke on the occasion.

*as you reflect upon your David, armed with a mere stone, facing down
the mighty Goliath – your man of strength, Gideon, emerging triumphant.*

She continues in a poignant way, drawing a comparison between the dead leader and David and Goliath.

*No sun outlasts its sunset,
but will rise again and bring the dawn.*

She pledges for everyone,

*Yes, Mandela's day is done. Yet we, his inheritors, will open the gates wider
for reconciliation. And we will respond generously to the cries of blacks
and whites, Asians, Hispanics, the poor who live piteously on the floor of
our planet,*

She mourns in her deep voice, on behalf of all the people of her country and also the world:

*Nelson Mandela's day is done. We confess it in tearful voices. Yet we
lift our own to say thank you. Thank you, our Gideon. Thank you, our
David, our great, courageous man. We will not forget you. We will not
dishonour you. We will remember and be glad that you lived among us,
that you taught us and that you loved us all.*

Author Als Hilton is of the opinion that her first biography was a significant contribution to the Black Feminist writings of the times, the era of 1970s, but he rejects the notion that it was an original work. He insists, in The New Yorker, that the big success of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is not due to its originality but due to,

Its resonance in the prevailing Zeitgeist

Carol Neubauer thinks that Angelou expresses her deep anguish suffered by Blacks forced into submission, with guilt over accepting too much and with protest and basic survival.

It is often believed that her poetry has not received that ‘*serious critical attention*’, as it might have deserved and a few critics opine that Angelou’s prose is superior to her poetry. William Sylvester of Contemporary Poets after calling her poems, ‘*sassy*’, proclaims that,

When we hear her poetry, we listen to ourselves,

He further asserts,

that her poetry has, received little serious critical attention".
(Sylvester: 19-20)

Bloom Lynn feels that Angelou's poetry is more interesting when she recites them. He dubs her performances

characteristically dynamic, (Bloom: 1716-8)

He states that Angelou,

moves exuberantly, vigorously to reinforce the rhythms of the lines, the tone of the words. Her singing and dancing and electrifying stage presence transcend the predictable words and phrases.(Bloom: 1716-8)

One of her main critics of poetry, Hagen has explained her poetry and poetical influences upon her this way:

Total poetic meaning stresses both emotional content and rhythmical elements. If the emotional content can be considered the bricks of the poem, the rhythm would be the mortar that binds. Angelou is a natural builder of poetry for she not only has a keen sensitivity to feeling, but also a marvelous sense of rhythm. Her musical awareness is so strong that she claims she hears music in ordinary, everyday circumstances. A rhythmical awareness has been reinforced by four important influences on her: first, her many readings of the lyrical King James Bible; second, acknowledged reading of traditional white writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, William Thackeray, and particularly William Shakespeare; and of prominent black writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, and of W. E. B. DuBois, "Litany at Atlanta." A third strong influence grew out of her participation in the rhythmical shouting and singing in African-American church services with their emotional spirituals; and the strong, moving sermons preached in those churches, whose tones she absorbed into her being. The fourth shaping force derives from childhood chants, songs and rhyme games long familiar in folklore.

(Hagen Layman B: 118:36)

Maya takes pride in her African ancestral heritage and wants every Afro-American to do the same. The elements in Maya Angelou's poetry can be traced back to the African-American oral traditions like slave and work songs , in particular her bringing into play of personal narrative and emphasis on individual ripostes to adversity, repression and loss. Talking about her work with George Plimpton, Angelou has said,

Once I got into it I realized I was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglas –the slave narrative- speaking in the first –person singular talking about the first person plural, always saying I, meaning, 'we'. And what a responsibility. Trying to work with that form, the Autobiographical mode, to change it, to make it bigger, richer, finer, and more inclusive in the twentieth century has been a great challenge for me.
(<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2279/the-art-of-fiction-no-119-maya-angelo>)

This much acclaimed Black woman essentially reflects the sensibilities of the universal citizen of the world of today. Hers is a voice of sanity, temperance, reason and peace.

III: The Versatility of Maya Angelou's Art

If one is lucky a solitary fantasy can transform a million realities.

This is Maya Angelou, the Phenomenal Woman of Afro-American literature. Her versatile art has mesmerizing effect on her readers/audience the world over. She is an internationally acclaimed writer whose writings possess the essential ingredients of an interesting story and friendly advice on how life has to be lived and how actually, it is lived, with her own personal example. Maya's words through myriad forms of literature including, biography poetry essays and miscellaneous other forms of writing, have got world acclaim and critical approval. Her words are relished for their confident appeal, unique charm, often found in King James Bible's words which resonate. In addition to this there is a profound and practical wisdom, in her writings. About her idea of writing, she says that, the idea is so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart. The number of people who draw inspiration from her life, her persona and her words are very large. She is hailed as a Global Renaissance Woman for the universality of her message of resilience and peace.

She has now acquired glamour, not very common for writers of her ilk. Her popularity has been on the rise and she is in constant limelight on popular TV shows and hosted by the likes of Oprah Winfrey. The recommendations by Oprah Book Club for Maya Angelou, whom she calls her ideal and mentor, helped her gain a big surge in the book sales. But despite all her wonderful accomplishments, which seem like a fairy tale for a poor Black girl from the South rural Stamps, Arkansas, she is gracious enough to accept her success with a quiet poise. She is not fond of celebrating the glitz of the show business, yet has used it sensibly. She speaks about the double standards of the world, of the people. She has made every attempt to recognize injustice in words and actions of the oppressors of those who put forward certain strict standards of beauty before women. This creates tremendous pressure on women to stick and follow the rules of beauty standards, set by others. She herself is presented as the role model of a perfect Black American woman.

She has also had a career as a singer dancer actor. Today she is one of the finest orators, and her shows where she speaks to the audience sitting on a low stool, recounting her life experiences, passages from her works, reciting performing her own poems, are quite popular and have been absolutely sold out shows. She not just writes her life stories, she also narrates them and is one of the best raconteurs, in today's world.

IV: Maya Angelou the Wisdom Guru

Maya Angelou has assumed the role of a Wisdom Guru in her later career. Her advice is lapped up readily by young old alike. She has several thousands of followers on Facebook and Twitter. Her quotes about love, loss, loneliness, alienation and sense of belonging, relationships and numerous other issues are found strewn all over the internet websites. Her quotable quotes are spread all over her works. She has a keen eye and sharpest observation when she says in her sixth biography, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*,

*Surprise, whether good or bad, can have a profound effect on the body.
Some people faint some cry aloud. (Angelou: 118)*

In the same book she gives another advice to the modern man. Surviving in the current times where the stressful life creates tremendous pressure, her advice is commendable.

*There are only so many times in life when our good fortunes and bad
fortunes intersect. At such junctions, it is wise to pray, and failing
that, keep the passport up-to- date and have some cash available.
(Angelou: 135)*

The same book reveals more about the author Maya Angelou. While discussing her decision about becoming a writer she pays tribute to the ever triumphant human spirit in these words:

*I thought if I wrote a book, I would have to examine the quality in the
human spirit that continues to rise despite the slings and arrows of
outrageous fortune. (Angelou: 210)*

Her words boost, inspire and comfort readers in a reassuring way. The most important thing that she emphasizes in her lessons of wisdom is the dignity of an individual and his or her right to think or feel as he or she wants to. Some of her quotes given here picked up from myriad of her biographies, essays, poetry and impromptu interviews. Some of her quotable quotes about various subjects of love, loss, determination, relationships, preserving individual dignity , success in life and other such issues are given below, which are lapped up by her readers through the social media.

- *Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.*
- *Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer. And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good.*

- *I'll protest like the dickens, but I don't complain. After hearing someone complain my grandmother would say, "There are people all over the world, black and white, rich and poor, who went to sleep when that person went to sleep, and they have never awakened. ... They would give anything for five minutes of what that person was complaining about."*
- *Forgiveness is the greatest gift you can gift yourself.*
- *My wish for you is that you continue. Continue to be who and how you are, to astonish a mean world with your acts of kindness. Continue to allow humor to lighten the burden of your tender heart.*
- *Have enough courage to love.*
- *Dignity—the word itself—has come to mean different things to different people, as many words do. It doesn't just mean always being stiff and composed. It means a belief in oneself, that one is worthy of the best. Dignity means that what I have to say is important, and I will say it when it's important for me to say it. Dignity really means that I deserve the best treatment I can receive. And that I have the responsibility to give the best treatment I can to other people.*
- *I'm not sure if resilience is ever achieved alone. Experience allows us to learn from example. But if we have someone who loves us—I don't mean who indulges us, but who loves us enough to be on our side—then it's easier to grow resilience, to grow belief in self, to grow self-esteem. And it's self-esteem that allows a person to stand up.*
- *I have always, dearly, pressed ideas to my heart, like letters from the blessed ancients to future children of children, saying "Okay!"*
- *Let me tell so much truth, I want to tell the truth in my work. The truth will lead me to all.*
- *If we have someone who loves us—I don't mean who indulges us, but who loves us enough to be on our side—then it's easier to grow resilience.*
- *I will not be abused. I will not be misused, not willingly. But I will be of use. Anybody who is not of use is useless*
- *It is wonderful to celebrate people who work. It is terrible to want to work, but not find work that wants you.*
- *You can only become truly accomplished at something you love. Don't make money your goal. Instead pursue the things you love.*
- *I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*

Her advice to women is sound safe and practical. She urges them to hold their dignity above everything else. She expresses admiration for the beauty found in every woman, the inner beauty. She considers them a force which has to be reckoned with. She had two great influences in her life, her grandmother and her mother. In later life she developed a friendly daughter relation with TV show host and writer, Oprah Winfrey and some others. She loves the women company and is a staunch feminist. This is the beauty of her message, be it a message for the entire humanity or the women or the downtrodden or the oppressed. She minces no words and speaks vociferously against any kind of injustice. In her own words, when asked what she does if she gets angry, in an interview originally published in Attitude Digest magazine, she said,

*Oh, yes, I will be angry. I won't be bitter. See, bitterness is like cancer.
So I will never be bitter. I will be angry. Unjust things make me angry.*

This is a wise advice to the people who care for their world and one that has to be paid attention to, she states further, in an interview:

*Write letters. Protest. Don't whine. Never whine. Whining lets a brute know that a victim is in the neighborhood. But protest, yes, all the way to the Supreme Court. I will be the tall black lady out there picketing ... Yes. I will not condone cruelty. I will not condone unjust actions.
(www.spirituscommunications.com)*

This is the reason for Maya Angelou, the writer for being given the honorable role of a modern day sage. Youth follow her and she too, (despite her reservations about the social media), understands its significance for allowing her to keep in touch with the young generation. She is said to have more than forty million fans on Face Book alone. It is noteworthy to see that the youth of today cherish and understand her. This is surprising as today's youth were not even born when her first book was published some forty-four years ago. This goes on to show her great caliber as a writer who has a remarkable effect on her readers. She has tens of lakhs of followers liking and tweeting her quotes.

Though she considers herself first and foremost, a poet, it is her biographical work that has made her what she is today. She achieved her grand literary success with her first work, a life history; *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a bold saga of a black girl growing up in racism ridden Stamps, Arkansas, in Southern United States of America. Published around 1969, it received international acclaim and huge popular success. It was able to capture the imagination of a whole generation. Through this work of hers where she has told her own personal tragedy, she has broken many barriers of the world she lived in. It's a tale told with passion and is straight from the heart. It is also hailed as a chronicle of Black American history. It is one of the first of the genre, a biography, from a Black woman who suffered harsh discrimination. This discrimination was twofold; first as a member of the Black community and secondly as a woman. This was, as can be imagined, extremely harsh for a young girl like Maya who suffered a series of setbacks in her life. Maya Angelou through her writings and her versatile career as a singer dancer actor a social and political activist and a much sought after motivational speaker, has done more for her country and community. Her country and her people are proud of her accomplishments, as a Black American woman. A large number of her readers claim that her words have changed the course of their life.

V: Maya's Forte

Her biggest strength is to talk boldly about any kind of abuse. She has the nerve to bring it out into open and by doing so; she offers courage to those who have suffered like her. The topics she talks about comfortably well; were once considered taboo. But through her sheer determination and ability to talk even about things considered forbidden, she has made them more acceptable. Her courage became contagious and taught people that they were not guilty for the things they suffered and were asked to face the facts and the related challenges intrepidly. She always possessed an abundance of confidence in her persona and looked into the eye of any

adversity and said, *You won't break me*. Broken she was not, never. She took the most horrific trauma of child rape and emerged out of it slowly but surely. It requires tremendous courage to follow in her footsteps and has been an inspiration to many women like her. Things never came easy to her. Armed with a meager education, an unwed mother at the age of seventeen and a series of myriad jobs and job losses and failing relationships, she has not only emerged as a sure winner but has also motivated others to follow suit. Maya's forte lies in her message of survival against odds. She reveals the secret of how the Black community survived all through those difficult years, in her sixth biography, in the following beautiful words:

You know how we survived?

We put surviving into our poems and into our songs. We put it into our folk tales. We danced surviving in Congo Square in New Orleans and put in our pots when we cooked pinto beans. We wore surviving on our backs when we clothed ourselves in the colors of the rainbow. We were pulled down so low we could hardly lift our own spirits. So we laughed whenever we got the chance.

(Angelou: 197)

Simple yet effective words, chronicling the pain of an era in impeccable words that is Maya Angelou's biggest forte.

VI: Maya Angelou As A Spokesperson for the Marginalized Sections of the Society

Maya Angelou through her continuous work of art or writings and as an activist for the cause of justice has made a place for herself in the public sphere. She wants equal treatment and justice for everyone and this has led to her emergence as a spokesperson of the downtrodden, the oppressed and the middle and lower-class people of the American society. Critic Braxton Joanne M, in his book remarks,

Without a doubt..., America's most visible black woman autobiographer

Not just that she has been bold enough to say those things usually avoided by the common folks. On 12th September 2012, the anniversary of terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York, USA, she spoke thus showing her rightful concern about a minority community, on a social media:

I am grateful to be an American. I am grateful that we can be angry at the terrorist assault and at the same time be intelligent enough not to hold a grudge against every Arab and every Muslim.

Such maturity of thought, wisdom of apprehending the situation correctly and valiant expression of sentiments together make Maya Angelou, the truly phenomenal woman of our times, and a representative speaker of the oppressed.

Though her works deal mainly with racism and her Black community issues, she speaks for the whole humanity and takes diversity of the world and the people, in a positive way appreciating it and asserting that, from her poem, *I Shall Not Be Moved*,

We are more alike than unlike. (Angelou: 225)

She has been actively involved in various social activities. She has been associated with some institutions working for the children afflicted with Autism. Most recently she has spoken about the Zimmerman trial where a young Black boy was killed by a man called Zimmerman and got acquitted soon after the crime. This gave rise to huge protests in America and Maya was reminded of the marches and protests that were held during the times of Martin Luther King Junior and Malcolm X. She reacted, expressing outrage that even after 50 years of, *I have a Dream* speech by Martin Luther King Junior, Blacks and even Black children are not safe and still get profiled on the basis of their God given dark skin. She said,

It is of interest that we are now celebrating that speech at the same time that there are people in the street again all over the country protesting the Zimmerman trial,” Angelou said. “It is amazing that it could happen actually 50 years ago.

In one of her essays she has urged her fellow Americans, who are deemed to be ignorant of the diverse cultures of the world, to be more knowing and understanding of various beautiful cultures and religions. She also tells them about the joy of assimilating, which does not harm their individual identities. She is aware of the significance of history and the role it plays in the growth of societies and individuals. She proclaims on 16 July, 2012,

Hold those things that tell your history and protect them,

She has said in a post dated 16 of July, 2012, Black American history and the history of slavery, a shameful saga for United States, considered the most advanced of our times. She has dealt extensively with the Black American and Slave history in her works and thinks of herself as an inheritor of the slave legacy of America. She deems studying of this history as important for every American, so one can apprehend the wrongs committed by the white people and develop empathy for the Blacks. She stresses the need to think of every miserable or poor man’s tragedy as the tragedy of an American and not discriminate on the basis of religion, caste, creed, race or the color of the skin.

VII: Maya Angelou As A Champion of Women’s Rights

Maya Angelou has fascinated millions of readers, moved and inspired immeasurable number of people. Her compassion and commitment to a life of dignity and fun makes her adorable. She turns fiery and furious at the injustice meted out to women, which is understood by her readers. Her narration of occurrences is such that, her reader sails along the flow of her prose or verses, immersing oneself in the sheer beauty of her language and charismatic style of expression. Her counsel for women is most inspiring. Her life stories or biographies are scattered with numerous accounts of her struggles for coming into her being and becoming an accomplished woman all on her own. Women identify with her struggles, her quest to be a good loyal wife in the company of a husband with a roving eye. Being a woman, all this proved more challenging for her. His continuous annoyance over her minor faults of leaving a speck of dust behind the sofa or his refusing to accept his disloyal behavior, and admonishing her for

questioning him, make her go silent. Her sarcastic remark over this is that, through her silence she was becoming a, *good wife*. This shows her deeply felt pain. This was a process of self-discovery and self- exploration that was constant. She wants a woman to be confident and not depending on men's largesse granted to her. She has always been financially independent and has taken care of the needs of herself and her son, with her own hard earned money through her myriad careers as singer, dancer, prostitute, pimp, producer, director, dramatist, actor and finally as a writer. She is read by women Black and White alike, who read her for inspiration. Women especially look up to her for counsel while dealing with the similar womanly situations such as infidelity by their men and having to put up daily struggles of life all alone. One of her most profound advice to women given in her essay collection, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, is worth quoting here:

It is imperative that a woman keep her sense of humor intact and at the ready. She must see, even if only in secret, that she is the funniest, looniest woman in her world, which she should also see as being the most absurd world of all times. (Angelou: 7)

VIII: Maya Angelou the Great Raconteur of Our Times

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

Maya Angelou the great raconteur of our time asserts. She possessed the talent of writing in her but needed friend and brother James Baldwin to recognize it. He was instrumental in making her write her first biography, although she wanted to become a poet first. She became an author, a writer, at the prodding of her friends and well-wishers. She categorically states,

A bird sings not because it can but because it has a song.

Explaining what makes or rather compels her to write she replies,
We write for the same reason that we walk, talk, climb mountains or swim the oceans- because we can. We have some impulse within us that makes us want to explain ourselves to other human beings. That's why we paint, that's why we dare to love someone- because we have the impulse to explain who we are. Not just how tall we are, or thin... but who we are internally... perhaps even spiritually. There's something, which impels us to show our inner-souls. The more courageous we are, the more we succeed in explaining what we know. When a poet writes a line that immediately translates from a black person to a white person, from an old person to young or when a rich person writes a line that a poor person can comprehend that's a success.

She explains in such an exhaustive and wonderful way to the question of why she writes. She is a prolific writer who has written on a myriad subjects.

While replying to a question regarding the role of the written word in social change, Maya Angelou has stated thus,

It's interesting, but this made me think of an incident in the American Revolution. There was a patriot named Patrick Henry. The soldiers of the

time were poorly fed, poorly dressed, poorly clothed.... cold, wet and hungry. In order to keep their spirits up, Patrick Henry wrote inflammatory but beautifully eloquent lines. Since most of the soldiers were illiterate, he used to go up and down the rows of soldiers reciting these lines. One of them was, "...I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death..." His words aroused order in the fighting men and, for a while, made them forget their misery.

She adds,

The written word confirms that you really can be more than you feel yourself to be right there, in that moment.

This shows how powerful words can be. Plato had banished poets from his ideal state for the reason that poets are useless and their work is not constructive in nature. He had condemned them for the reason that their poetry is full of talk about wine and women, in his view making a man lethargic and rendering him useless.

Maya Angelou has tried to explicate how poetry, the written word can be influencing minds and compelling people for standing up for a cause, a just cause. Maya Angelou states how she herself came to be influenced by the written word in her childhood after the horrific incident of her rape. She describes,

When I was a young girl, I would read Shakespearian sonnets. At one point I thought Shakespeare was a Black Girl... a Black American Girl in the South. I had been sexually abused when I was young, and I stopped talking altogether from the time I was 7 till the time I was about 13. At the time, I thought everyone could look at me and see that a man had abused me, and that they thought I had liked it.

(<http://thoughteconomics.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/why-we-write.html>)

Maya Angelou says, she used to encourage the new generation to understand something to allow them to step-forward without going back, without having to repeat everything. This is the basis of Aesop's tales, as well, she informs. Story telling lets people make their decisions in the light of mistakes of the previous generation and helps, them to be cautiously careful in their choices. Writer of famous trilogy of books about history of language, writing and reading, Steven Roger Fischer, in his book, *A History of Reading* enlightens us saying that

Today's white-collar worker spends more time reading than eating, drinking, grooming, travelling, socializing or on general entertainment and sport – that is, five to eight hours of each working day. (Only sleep appears to claim as much time.) The computer and Internet? Both are reading revolutions." He continues to explain that, "...reading embraces so much more than work or web. What music is to the spirit, reading is to the mind. Reading challenges, empowers, bewitches, enriches. We perceive little black marks on white paper or PC

screen and they move us to tears, open up our lives to new insights and understandings, inspire us, organize our existences and connect us with all creation.... Surely there can be no greater wonder?
(www.thoughteconomicsblogspot.uk)

Maya became a voracious reader since childhood. Shakespeare became her love, white love and she knew she had to hide the fact from her grandmother as she hated anything that was remotely White. She says further in the interview,

I read, "...When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, I all alone bemoan my outcast state..." and it connected with me- and then teachers told me that Shakespeare was a white man? An English man? That he lived four centuries earlier? I thought they couldn't possibly know what they're talking about... no white man could know what I feel.
(<http://thoughteconomics.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/why-we-write.html>)

Even in her comment about her childhood love of Shakespeare, the element of racism was not missing. Her experiences make her fit this bill.

IX: The Power of Her Writing

The power of Maya lies in the fact that she appeals to the emotions of people. Her life experiences as she describes them in her work and her musings and reflections have become part of the legend by now. Some critics think that she should have stopped after writing her magnum opus and tend to disregard her works following her first biography as nothing but recycling of the similar stuff. But she has got popular support for her later works as well. Common people particularly members of her Black community love her powerful narrations. These power writings engulf a reader's emotions and one can't stop oneself, from admiring her fortitude in facing the challenges. Though sometimes one may feel that she is repetitive in her descriptions, yet her stylish way of presentation of happenings tends to relieve the perceived monotony. A few critics still insist that there are some repetitions and exaggerations of some incidents found in her stories. But overall her life story gives a great lesson to us all, and that is however hard or harsh, life might be, one must keep on living and live with gusto. She says again in an interview in reply to a query,

I've learned that no matter what happens, or how bad it seems today, life does go on, and it will be better tomorrow. I've learned that you can tell a lot about a person by the way he/she handles these three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights. I've learned that regardless of your relationship with your parents, you'll miss them when they're gone from your life. I've learned that making a "living" is not the same thing as making a "life." I've learned that life sometimes gives you a second chance. I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw something back. I've learned that whenever I decide something with an open heart, I usually make the right decision.
I've learned that even when I have pains, I don't have to be one. I've learned that every day you should reach out and touch someone. People love a warm hug, or just a friendly pat on the back.

I've learned that I still have a lot to learn. I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

It is her philosophy that makes her popular among her readers. Moreover, her advices, and her wise ways of and about life, are told in a unique way.

X: Maya Angelou's Essential Message and Its Universal Appeal

Her themes have a wide range, from loneliness, search of identity, love, loss of love, bereavement, racism and her deep sorrowful reflections on the oppression of any kind. What makes her message worthy of attention is, she speaks for the entire humanity. She finds that humans are more alike than unlike. She has emphatically stated in one of her essays that,

Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become friends.

For Maya Angelou, Jews, Muslims Christians all are her friends. She has said affectionately that she can never hate her Muslim darlings, a bold statement considering the scenario today where Muslims are looked down upon with suspicion. She asserts,

We are all human; therefore, nothing human can be alien to us.

The irresistible beauty and universality of her message is so charming and profound that her message needs to be read by all the people, all over the world.

XI: Maya Angelou As a Global Renaissance Woman

Dr. Maya Angelou has lived many lives in her one life. She has experienced life not just from close quarters but from various angles. She has played myriad roles, that each holds a true lesson of perseverance and firm determination to maintain individual dignity despite huge odds against her. Her life story reads a lesson in how a girl next door develops her abilities to survive in a cruel world and hostile environment and overcomes all the hurdles. Apart from being one of the most prominent and influential voices of literature she is also hailed world over, as a Global Renaissance woman whose message has that spark to lighten up the imaginations of hundreds of thousands of people around the world, irrespective of their religion nationalities, color or gender. Her universal appeal can be gauged from the fact that recently when a prominent leader Nelson Mandela died; it was her poem which circulated the world over in more than 15 languages and was considered as the official tribute to the great leader, from the world community. She emerged on the world scene with the recitation of her poem, *On the Pulse of Morning*, at the inauguration of American President Bill Clinton in 1993. This recitation was broadcast live all over the world. It made her truly a global name. In 2011, American President Barack Obama presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

It seems imperative that women read this Global Renaissance Woman Maya Angelou. Her message of peace and harmony, appeal to try to understand fellow human beings and think beyond one's own religion nationality, gender or color has found tremendous positive reception

the world over. Her championing of the causes like fighting against oppression of any kind, discrimination based on race color or gender has been found most amicable among the world which has now turned into a global village. The Global Renaissance woman's message of finding unity in multiplicity, of peace and harmony, and making our world a truly livable place is worth listening to.