

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN MAYA ANGELOU'S POEM *STILL I RISE*

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Abstract

This study contributes to the Black women's resistance against the intersecting systems of racial, gender, and class oppression (triple oppression) in the poem of Maya Angelou *Still I Rise*. This research applies Barbara Smith's Black feminist framework to reveal how Angelou's poetic language transforms racialized oppression into collective empowerment. This study is grounded in the limited number of studies that specifically apply Barbara Smith's Black feminist approach to analyze about women's empowerment in literary texts. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, the study analyzes the poetic language, imagery, repetition, and historical references to identify representations of triple oppression and resistance in the poem. The findings reveal that Angelou establishes resistance as both a personal and collective political act through self-assertive voice, historical consciousness, and self-redefinition. Ultimately, the poem portrays Black women's resistance as a continuous process of empowerment that challenges dominant narratives and affirms Black women's agency and identity. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on Black women's writing. It is hoped that this study contributes as a literary work that challenges the dominant and patriarchal systems in the society.

Keywords: Barbara Smith, black feminism, Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

1. Introduction

Ananda & Suhadi (2025) argues that in life, humans have to face challenges and suffering during conflict. It also happens with the Black women. Even though they are not treated as personal property anymore, they still face intersectional oppression such as racial sexism and gender-based racism (Watson & Hunter, 2016). As stated by Chapagain (2020), in comparison to the Black men, the women are oppressed more. This leaves Black women and girls suffering under intersectional oppression (Gomez, 2023). They are victims of racist and sexist oppression, including lynching and rape. Black women endure what Barbara Smith calls "geometric oppression" (Smith, 1978). Davis & Jones argues that the oppression creates an obstacle for the Black women to develop their potentials. They are restricted from participating in the society. Historically, the image of the 'strong Black woman' has served as a justification for the oppression of Black women (Davis & Jones, 2021). The concept of oppression has been shaped by societal beliefs that one group is inferior to another (Dominilla et al., 2020). This has led to women's emancipation becoming a crucial aspect of international development (Volker & Doneys, 2021). This emancipation is also referred to as the feminist movement. This movement is then used in the context of equality for women (Branch & Kasztelnik, 2023).

Black feminism is different from mainstream feminism. It seeks to understand the injustices affecting the daily lives of Black women (Weida, 2023). Meanwhile, feminism focuses only on the White women. Black feminism emerges from the social and political realities of Black women's lives. It emphasizes that gender oppression cannot be separated from race and class oppression. As articulated by Barbara Smith, Black feminist criticism insists that literature written by Black women must be read as a political act that reflects lived experiences shaped by interlocking systems of domination (Smith, 1978). Within this social context, literary texts serve not only as artistic expressions but also as forms of resistance that challenge racist and patriarchal ideologies. Black feminist criticism foregrounds Black women's voices, agency, and self-definition, which have long been marginalized within both literary canons and feminist discourse.

Literature plays a crucial role in this process, particularly in expressing marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives. Maya Angelou's poem entitled *Still I Rise* was published in 1978. This poem consists of 43 lines and 9 stanzas. In the end of the poem, the word "I rise" has been repeated three times. This poem captivates interest in the women's empowerment. It has become the portrayal of resilience and empowerment. This poem is influenced by the narrator's personal experience in facing the discrimination as a woman of color. This poem does not only stand as a beautiful literary piece but also as a declaration of courage and steadfastness in the face of oppression (Hamidah & Oktaviani, 2024). The approach introduced by Barbara Smith makes an analysis which emphasizes more on the triple oppressions experienced by the Black women. A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and crucially interlocking factors in the works of the Black women is an absolute necessity (Smith, 1978).

There are numerous studies studied about *Still I Rise*. Meanwhile, very few studies have examined the poem by using Barbara Smith's Black feminist framework. As a result, the dimension of triple oppression and its transformation into collective empowerment remain underexplored. For example, the study by Ullah, et. al (2025) entitled "Power, Identity, and Resistance in Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise*: A Critical Discourse Analysis" performs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the poem *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou, drawing on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model to discuss how linguistic, rhetorical, and discursive resources generate themes of power, identity, and resistance. This study focuses on Black women's experience in attempting to survive from the oppression in the male-dominated and racially stratified society. Through this lens of Black feminism, the study aims to explore how triple oppression portrayed in *Still I Rise* and how Black women empower themselves. However, few studies have examined *Still I Rise* through the specific lens of Barbara Smith's Black feminist criticism. This article aims to fill the research gap by applying Barbara Smith's framework to feminist criticism to analyze women's empowerment in Maya Angelou's poem.

Ullah, et. al (2025) on their research focuses on the power, identity, and resistance in *Still I Rise*. It drew on Norman's Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model to discuss how linguistic, rhetorical, and discursive resources generate themes of power, identity, and resistance. The study uses a critical discourse analysis. Meanwhile, Hamidah & Oktaviani (2024) made a study of the poem which focuses on the lexical and contextual meaning. However, studies which highlight about triple oppression and resistance through Barbara Smith's framework are still understudied.

The significance of this study lies in three key aspects: first, it highlights about triple oppression portrayed in the poem; second, it examines the resistance through which Black women achieve empowerment and self-definition; third, it contributes for the academic

purposes by applying Barbara Smith's framework to a feminist poem. By understanding the Black women's experiences, readers are encouraged to recognize resistance not only as opposition to oppression but also as an ongoing process of empowerment and self-recognition.

This study aims to analyze Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise* through the lens of Barbara Smith's Black feminist criticism to explore how Black women's experiences of triple oppression are represented and resisted. Specifically, the objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the forms of racial, gender, and class oppression portrayed in the poem; (2) to examine how Black women's resistance is articulated as a process of empowerment and self-definition; and (3) to demonstrate the relevance of Barbara Smith's Black feminist framework in literary analysis.

Based on these objectives, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How is triple oppression portrayed in Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise*?
2. How does the poem represent Black women's resistance and empowerment in *Still I Rise*?
3. How does Barbara Smith's Black feminist criticism deepen the understanding of empowerment in *Still I Rise*?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Black Feminist Criticism and Triple Oppression

The theory of black feminism plays a crucial role in the analysis of literary works produced by African-American writers, as it can reveal the intricate interplay between race, gender, and class experienced by black women in depth (Labibah & Wajiran, 2024; Wajiran, 2024; Wajiran & Apriyani, 2025). Black feminist criticism emerges from the oppression experienced by Black women in society. The oppressions are in the form of racial, gender, and classes. Chapagain (2020) stated that Black women, being dependent on black males, suffered more than their male members and became helpless. Wang & Yao (2019) views men expected women to never have emotions like anger or impatience, and to never be aggressive. Therefore, the oppression has blocked Black women from flourishing their hidden potentiality and to make a notable contribution in the society. Black feminist criticism by Barbara Smith is used to emphasize about the function of the poem as a part of political movement to empower Black women. Smith (1978) emphasizes the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class in shaping Black women's cultural production.

By acknowledging the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression, Black feminist criticism provides a powerful lens for examining how Black women transform lived experiences of marginalization into narratives of resistance and empowerment. This study adopts this combined theoretical perspective to examine how Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise* articulates Black women's resistance as a response to triple oppression.

2.2 Resistance and Empowerment in Black Women's Writing

Analyzing women's resistance in literature often reveals the profound struggles and inspiring triumphs of female characters within patriarchal societies (Fitri & Hartono, 2023). This literature review examines the theoretical underpinnings and practical manifestations of women's resistance drawn on Black feminist approach by Barbara Smith. Black women writers employ literature as a space to challenge racist, sexist, and class-based structures that marginalize their voices and experiences. Within Black feminist criticism, resistance is understood not only as political opposition but also as the act of survival, self-definition, and cultural affirmation. Barbara Smith (1978) emphasizes that Black women's

writing is inherently political because it emerges from lived experiences shaped by interlocking oppressions, making literary expression itself a form of resistance.

In *Still I Rise*, the application of Black feminist concept by Barbara Smith represents a subtle approach to analyze about women's resistance employed by Black women. Studies related to resistance by Michael et. al. (2021) and Martina (2024) have shown that depicting women's resistance in literature often mirrors real-world struggles for gender equality, providing both inspiration and a blueprint for challenging societal norms. *Still I Rise* is indeed part of Black feminist literature, ensuring the world profoundly feels the pain of their absence. (Smith, 1978). Because of the resistance shown in *Still I Rise*, the triumphs lead to significant changes, which enhances self-confidence, elevated social status of the Black women (Putriani & Wajiran, 2024). This is supported by Duncan (2023) that cultural factor inhibits African American women's desire to disclose their abuse is their awareness of the systemic oppression of African American men, such as lynching, imprisonment, unemployment, and the sexual politics of sexual violence. (calibri 12)It provides the relevant literature on the subject and the difference(s) of the manuscript from other papers so that it is an innovative one or presenting novelty. It must be appropriate and adequate.

3. Research Method

The research design used in this study is descriptive qualitative. The subject of this study is Black women's experience as survivors. This method is considered appropriate because it focuses on exploring "what" kinds of oppression are depicted and "how" they start resisting the oppression through the empowerment. It is analyzed through Barbara Smith's Black feminism framework.

The data in this study consists of the primary and secondary data. The primary one comes from Maya Angelou's poem entitled *Still I Rise*. Meanwhile, the secondary one comes from peer-reviewed journal articles and essays related to Black feminism, women empowerment, and resistance. These data are used to emphasize and make the interpretation become stronger.

In terms of data collection, this study follows several systematic steps to ensure the validity and relevance of the findings. The primary data are drawn from *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou, specifically by identifying and highlighting lines that relate to the oppression and resistance. This involves identifying key excerpts that reflect different types of oppression, collecting textual evidence that suits the topics and supported by relevant theoretical perspectives, and grouping the quotations based on the kinds of oppression or women's empowerment.

In terms of data analysis, it is classified by the data collection which relates to the study. This process includes some steps such as identifying the relevance in the data, organizing the data carefully, explaining the findings, and drawing conclusion. This method enables the object of the research to be presented in detail and its traits, nature, and model to be fully understood. (Furidha, 2023). The credibility is achieved through a close reading of *Still I Rise* supported by Barbara Smith's Black feminism and peer-reviewed journals. Even though this study focuses on a single poem, thick description is provided in the analysis by explaining the social, historical, and cultural context of Black women's oppression and resistance. Therefore, this study allows readers and future researchers to determine the relevance of the findings for analyzing other literary works that address Black women's empowerment, resistance, and feminist consciousness.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Reflection of Triple Oppression Faced by Black Women

Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems which shape these are in the "real world" of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, and unknown (Smith, 1978). This invisibility which goes beyond anything that either Black men or white women experience about in their writing, is one reason it is difficult for Barbara Smith to start because it is overwhelming to break a massive silence surrounding Black women's lives. In Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise*, Black women are represented as living under the conditions of triple oppression. According to Jones, as cited in Saaed and Munir (2020), triple oppression involves the categories of race, gender, and class all together as features of woman oppression, particularly women of color.

Racial oppression experienced by Black women is shown in the line, "You may write me down in history" (1); "With your bitter, twisted lies," (2); "You may trod me in the very dirt." (3) which state that Black women were put in the situation of being historically silenced and devalued in a male-dominated and racially-oppressive society. It is in line with Smith (1978) for what she said as a massive silence. The term "write me down in history" highlights the contradictions of the truth and what is being portrayed by the White as written in Smith (1978). In other words, the poem is a portrayal of reality in contrast with what is being framed by the dominant society. The gustatory imagery in the second line describes how the society abused her with bitterness and lies to discourage her. The term "dirt" has a literal meaning, that is, any substance that makes something dirty (Oxford Learner's Dictionary). The "very dirt" can also mean to criticize or say bad things about somebody in public, in a way that is unfair. This line is an imagery of the portrayed abused. Maya Angelou is the representation of Black women being treated like a dirt. This statement aligns with Smith (1978) that Black women have been so ignored. The male-dominated and oppressive society is supported by the quotation that Black women viewed the historic emasculation of Black men as cultivating an expectation for Black women to "submit" to their male partners in order to avoid mimicking and to counteract the lack of power Black men had in society (Rice, 2023). This poem invokes the historical legacy of slavery that continues to shape the Black women's lived experiences.

Gender oppression is marked with, "Does my sexiness upsets you?" (25); "Does it come as a surprise" (26); "That I dance like I've got diamonds" (27); followed by "at the meeting of my thighs?" (28). These lines refer to the patriarchal assumption that women, Black women especially, are objectified sexually. Maya Angelou arouses the abuser who becomes upset of her femininity and boldness. Experiences of racial discrimination tend to start early in childhood and continue throughout life compared to other types of discrimination (e.g., sexism and ageism (Fani, et.al., 2021). A Black woman's experience with discrimination can be determined by the additive experience of being racially minoritized and a woman or there can be a unique combinatorial process that causes even greater experienced discrimination when racism and sexism are combined (Hudson, et.al., 2023). As stated by Bianchini (2025) that Black women suffered at the time, as they were imprisoned, sexually abused, and chased after if they tried to escape. If caught, their fate was to be executed and have their bodies possibly violated or mutilated even after death.

Besides the racial and gender oppression, class oppression is found through social exclusion. This is found in Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise* as in, "You may write me down in history" (1); followed by "... out of the huts of history's shame" (29). These lines evoke the systematic relegation of Black women to positions of poverty and social inferiority. Black

women have to fight not only against white patriarchy and white women's racism but also against sexism of black men within their own race (Chapagain, 2020).

4.2 Resistance as a Form of Black Women's Empowerment

Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise* reflects on women's power and identity. Resistance and empowerment are reflected through the repetition of word, "I rise," which comes as an intense final in the stanzas. Through repeated words like, "I rise," Angelou performs resilience and regains voice and agency for disempowered identities (Ullah, et.al., 2025). Angelou's poetry is not only literary but a discursive intervention which remakes Black womanhood and recovers cultural and political space (Ullah, et. al. 2025). This poem by Maya Angelou can be understood as a part of Black feminist political movement that can give power or support to examine Black women's experience through studying history, literature, and culture, in line with Barbara Smith's Black feminist criticism (Smith, 1978).

Black American women are considered totally different from other women not only in color of skin but also in mental aptitude. They were thought neither beautiful in body nor average in mental capacity and were taken as unwomanly and tasteless female sex. (Chapagain, 2020). The resistance is illustrated by this line,

"But still, like dust, I'll rise." (4)

The line 'But still, like dust, I'll rise' symbolizes spiritual and historical endurance, representing the collective consciousness of Black women's resilience as theorized by Smith (1978). It is also supported by Hamidah & Oktaviani (2014) which refer the term "dust" as something overlooked and people tried to ignore. Moreover, it is defined as the unstoppable nature of Black women's resilience to rise.

Then, Maya continues with, "Does my sassiness upset you?" (5); "Does my haughtiness offend you?" (17); "Does my sexiness upset you?" (25). These lines suggest that the resistance as a form of Black women's empowerment that they start being brave and doing movements.

In the poem, there also portrayed terms to represent the body characteristic of Black women. This can be found in, "That I dance like I've got diamonds," (27); followed by "at the meeting of my thighs." (28). The term "diamond" implies that the body of Black women is solid, strong, dense, and precious. The term "thighs" refers to a sexist statement as what is portrayed in Smith (1978). She viewed that Black women sometimes unfortunately face the sexist treatment. This statement is supported by Smith's view on Black feminism that this poem is a resistance to the outsider's thought as women were known to be powerless to alter either their political or cultural oppression (Smith, 1978).

The resistance also depicts on, "Just like moons and like suns" (10); "With the certainty of tides" (11); "Just like hopes springing high," (12); "Still I'll rise." (13). These lines mentioned moons, suns, which refer to objects in the solar system that can shine because of the reflection from the sun. These selected words mean that they start recognizing their identity and existence. They will always rise. These terms are aligned with Ullah, et. al (2025) that they reinforce the idea of self-proclaimed value against the society that devalue Black women in general. This is in line as Smith (1978) stated that Black feminist criticism would be constantly aware of the political situations of the Black women.

Analyzing women's resistance enables the revelation of struggle and inspiring stories of female in the patriarchal society (Fitri & Hartono, 2023). Black women writers employ literature as a space to challenge racist, sexist, and class-based structures that marginalize their voices and experiences. Within Black feminist criticism, resistance is understood not only as political opposition but also as the act of survival, self-definition, and cultural affirmation.

Barbara Smith (1978) emphasizes that Black women's writing is inherently political because it emerges from lived experiences shaped by interlocking oppressions, making literary expression itself a form of resistance.

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4.3 Women's Voice in Black Feminist Perspective

The theory of black feminism plays a crucial role in the analysis of literary works produced by African-American writers, as it can reveal the intricate interplay between race, gender, and class experienced by black women in depth (Labibah & Wajiran, 2024; Wajiran, 2024; Wajiran & Apriyani, 2025). Black feminist criticism emerges from the oppression experienced by Black women in society. The oppressions are in the form of racial, gender, and classes. Chapagain (2020) stated that Black women, being dependent on black males, suffered more than their male members and became helpless. Wang & Yao (2019) views men expected women to never have emotions like anger or impatience, and to never be aggressive. Therefore, the oppression has blocked Black women from flourishing their hidden potentiality and to make a notable involvement in the society. Black feminist criticism by Barbara Smith is used to emphasize about the function of the poem as a part of political movement to empower Black women. Smith (1978) emphasizes the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class in shaping Black women's cultural production.

By acknowledging the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression, Black feminist criticism provides a powerful lens for examining how Black women transform lived experiences of marginalization into narratives of resistance and empowerment. This study adopts this combined theoretical perspective to examine how Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise* articulates Black women's resistance as a response to triple oppression.

Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise* is a part of political movement as mentioned in Barbara Smith's Black feminist approach. The oppression and massive silence were caused by the condition that any discussions of Afro-American writers were denied not only literacy but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life (Smith, 1978). Through *Still I Rise*, the silence has become loud that the existence of Black women, along with the culture and oppression began to be revealed.

"You may shoot me with your words," [21]; "You may cut me with your eyes," [22]; "You may kill me with your hatefulness," [23]; "But still, like air, I'll rise." [24].

These lines indicate that Black women start to shut the massive silence so that the movement cannot be ignored as stated by Smith (1978). Through these lines, narrator attempts to show the oppression done against Black women physically and psychologically, such as verbal oppression that can be known by the term "your words," "cut me with your

eyes," "hatefulness," that imply to the hatred thrown to the Black women in the society. It emphasizes the abuses gotten by the Black women physically and verbally.

"Out of the huts of history's shame" [29]; "I rise" [30]; "Up from a past that's rooted in pain" [31]; "I rise" [32]; "I'm a Black ocean, leaping and wide," [33]; "Welling and swelling I bear in the tide." [34].

These lines refer to the lower status of Black women since they had been mistreated. The low status given under the oppression were slavery. This is so ironic that the propaganda towards Black people can shut the suffering they faced. The term "black ocean and bear in the tide" represent the awakening strength and spirit that Black women do to fight against the torture. The term "ocean" depicts strength and unstoppable force. The term "the tide bearing and swelling" depicts the inevitable rise of Black women's spirit and resistance.

"Leaving behind nights of terror and fear," (35); "I rise" (36); "Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear" (37); "I rise" (38); "Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave," (39); "I am the dream and the hope of the slave." (40).

These lines above are in contrast with the first stanza. The first stanza is what was portrayed by Smith (1978) as a massive silence. In contrast, line 35-40 voices the recovery, resistance, and survival. It symbolizes the Black women's struggle in achieving freedom, out of the slavery. The term "night," "terror," and "fear" symbolize the feeling of being frightened, being in darkness. They have started a movement to reclaim their dignity and existence. It is supported by Smith (1978) that Maya Angelou, as the Black female writer contributes and manifests common approaches to the act of creating literature as a result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that feminist literary criticism not only enriches textual interpretation. It also intensifies about the marginalized voices. It can be concluded that the Black women used to be under triple oppressions. They were oppressed not only under the colonialism but also by the male from their own race. This study finds that Maya Angelou's poem portrays the turmoil of living as women of color faced by the Black women in the society.

Through a confident first-person voice, repetition, and historical consciousness, Maya Angelou shows resistance as both a personal and collective political act. By using Barbara Smith's Black feminist framework, the poem reveals how Black women change silence, suffering, and historical marginalization into defining their identity. In this way, resistance is a tool for reclaiming identity and challenging the dominant belief.

The existence, experiences, and culture of Black women have become recognized worldwide. *Still I Rise* contributes to breaking this silence. The poem not only challenges the marginalization of Black women writers and artists but also asserts their positions within literary and cultural discourse. As a result, Black women's voices gain visibility and recognition at both personal and collective levels.

In other words, academically, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the writings by Black women. This study illustrates how Maya Angelou's poem entitled *Still I Rise* has become a literary work which challenges the dominant and patriarchal systems in the society. Socially, this study highlights the realities of Black women lived under oppressions. Therefore, it is hoped that this can raise awareness in the inequality and gendered racism in the society.

For future research, it is recommended that scholars expand the application of Black feminist criticism to other literary genres and works by Black women writers in order to further

explore resistance and empowerment across diverse cultural and historical contexts. Comparative studies involving Barbara Smith's Black feminist criticism may also offer insights into the complexity of Black women's experiences. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature functions as a site of political resistance and empowerment for marginalized communities.

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