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Theory Rhetoric/Writing

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**The Journey of a Woman**

In my short journey around the world, I can say with conviction that one of the most misunderstood species in the world is a woman, and one of the most resilient of the species is a black woman. The cry of a black woman can be heard from generation to generation, as she passes her story from ancestor to ancestor, son to son, and daughter to daughter. The stories of her victories and defeats dance on the tongue of her lineage. Some have made it to print, some have made it to the big screen, and some come alive in a cozy kitchen as the holiday meal is being prepared. Whatever the case is we must admit that these wonderful tales of life and triumph had earned a spot not only in history, but forever in rhetoric. Black Feminist Rhetoric is powerful and has demanded a seat at a table that never intended to pull out a chair for this particular scholarship. Many courageous women such as Sojourner Truth, Alice Walker, India Arie, Jill Scott, Oprah Winfrey have been afforded a seat at this table. However, none with more wisdom, dignity, and sass as Dr. Maya Angelou. Dr. Angelou is an icon who has impacted the black feminist rhetoric scholarship over the span of her lifetime. Whether they want to officially give it a space in the scholarship or not because of women like Maya Angelou, it’s validity can’t be denied.

Dr. Maya Angelou’s book *"Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now"* offers a profound collection of personal reflections and life lessons, conveyed through her poetic storytelling. In this work, Angelou brings the world to her classroom by offering wisdom passed down through generations of strong, resilient women in her family. She shares stories of hardship and growth, weaving in lessons about the power of repurposing pain, self-discovery and acceptance, and also highlighting the importance of understanding one's worth in the face of adversity.

Angelou’s writing emphasizes the transformative nature of resilience, reminding readers of the strength that can emerge from challenges. Her ability to inspire and empower others through her experiences creates a bridge of connection, inviting readers to embrace their own journeys of growth, self-empowerment, and healing. The book becomes more than just a memoir and an artifact—it’s a guide to overcoming life's obstacles with grace and strength, while nurturing one’s sense of self-worth and embracing the wisdom that comes from struggle.

Angelou was a multi-talented woman with a large body of work. In addition to writing seven autobiographies, three essay books, and multiple poetry books, she is recognized for several plays, films, and television series that span more than half a century. She was honored with more than thirty honorary doctorates and numerous awards (Poeticus). Oprah Winfrey, Tyler Perry, Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, and others were among her many friends. Generations were impacted by her experience and influence. She has reached mass audiences by unlocking and releasing her voice which was silenced in her early years for five years due to trauma.

Black women have been the cornerstone of their families for ages. For many generations, their homes have provided a sense of protection and comfort. According to one author's work, "These homeplaces acknowledged Black subjectivities, inspired the Black community's thoughts and emotions, and functioned as a place of affirmation and resistance" (hooks 37). (Browdy) These kinds of environments are the ones that I cherish and that also influenced Dr. Angelou's life. The chapters in her book *"I Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey"* are about her experiences in life. She describes one of these touching, life-changing experiences she had with her mother in the passage "Further New Direction." Maya, 16, was devastated by her job termination and was sobbing in her bed. Her mother came in and asked why she was crying. Her mother's reaction when Maya informed her that she had been fired was invaluable.

“Fired? Fired?” She laughed, “What the hell is that? Nothing. Tomorrow you’ll go looking for another job. That’s all.” (Angelou 80)

She dabbed at Maya’s tears and said, “So what? Remember, you were looking for a job when you found the one you just lost. Si you’ll just be looking for a job one more time.” (Angelou 80)

I can only imagine the shift that took place in young Maya at that moment. To realize what originally felt like a defeat was actually a victory that led to another opportunity. Through life lessons such as this one Maya learned to repurpose her pain, and I dare say she learned the power of community. It is in moments like this one that character was birth throughout many lineages.

Being a woman and a black woman at that, comes with its own share of hurdles. In addition to finding out and becoming who you were created to be, you must also find out who you are in the lens of others, and how you allow that to shape who you were created to be. Angelou shares details of her personal quest for self-awareness in this piece. She talks about the importance of accepting oneself and the wisdom that comes with growing older and the experiences that come with that grace. Angelou inspires readers to discover their own routes to self-awareness and to embrace their true selves despite any challenges they encounter by sharing anecdotes from her own life, including her setbacks and victories. In the chapter, Getup Maya is a young single mother who is coming into her own personality and style, which she loves, but soon comes to learn her children are embarrassed by her concocted “getups”. when she visits them at school. She was oblivious to her son’s feelings until he sat her down one day and asked her if she had any sweaters that matched. He then proceeded to ask her if she could only come to the school when called. Maya quickly understood what he was asking and made it a point to tone down her wardrobe until he grew a little older and could handle her “getups”. You see, despite her accommodating her son for a season, she could not stray from who she was created to be because it was part of her makeup. Black women over the course of time have often been asked to change. In the words of some, they were “too black”, not “black enough”, too “light skinned” or too “dark skinned”. I remember when Kamala Harris was running for President many said she wasn’t “black enough”. When you think about statements like this, what do they really mean in the grand scheme of things? Are they saying in skin tone or in spirit? It is really quite foolish when you think about it. Yet, it is stories like this that make Black Feminist Rhetoric so profound and so necessary. It was through experiences such as these that Maya came into her own self-discovery of who she was and to some degree she began to accept it, though I believe her acceptance was from a skewed viewpoint. Sometimes as black women we change what we can and accept what we feel is not changeable.

In the chapter, New Directions Maya discusses the crossroads of Ms. Annie Johnson, who in the face of divorce with two small children, was faced with making an unimaginable change. Since she couldn't bear to leave her kids alone while working and couldn't work at the lumber mill or cotton gin, she did something that was unimaginable for a black woman at the time: she started a business that fed the employees of the two establishments, which eventually expanded into a store. She redefined herself in the face of an insurmountable challenge rather than letting it define her. Angelou's grandmother was named Annie Johnson. This is her heritage's strength, which she carried and shared with millions of people via her writing.

Adversity is a creature that can make you or break you. How you respond will determine the outcome. Maya was a true testament to this statement. Her journey of adversity began at the age of eight years old when she was raped by her mother’s boyfriend, who was eventually killed by Maya’s relatives for this terrible act. Weighed down by guilt for his death Maya went silent for five years only talking to her brother Bailey. In this one situation she learned the power of a voice, so much so that she became afraid of her own. Angelou did not allow this fear to stop her. She went on to do great exploits in the literary and entertainment industry. Nevertheless, something was still lacking. Angelou describes entering a renowned bar that was frequented by the greats and learning that she had been named the newspaper's "Person of the Week" in the chapter Extending the Boundaries. Well wishes and toasts were offered to her, but they soon dissipated along with the crowd. She states at this moment:

“Here in my finest hour, I was alone. What had I done to any man to make him want to leave me and, even worse, not to win me to his side in the first place.” (Angelou 108) Maya eventually had a meltdown in the pub and went to a table full of gentlemen who had previously toasted with her, and she did something shocking. Maya asked them, "Do you mean to tell me that's not enough for you?" after listing all of her qualities, such as enjoying sex and maintaining a tidy home. (Angelou 108) The men were embarrassed, and they remained silent during the question. When she reflected on that instance, I couldn’t help but wonder if she felt embarrassed as well. She had boasted about all her possessions in that instant, hoping that someone else would notice and appreciate them, but she didn't appear to do so herself. It is in pivotal moments such as these that Angelou began to come into her own. You see this in her poems as the years went forward. She went on to exude confidence as the “Phenomenal Woman” so many women still spout out today to describe their rare and exceptional beauty and value. It was in these rare moments that we see that her worth was born and valued through adversity.

In conclusion, we must admit the essence of a black woman can’t be contained within a scholarship, but we can’t deny that it deserves its place right there with all the others. Stories of triumph and grandeur, defeat and adversity that was/is used to build a nation of people, surely deserves to be shared so that it can continue to build, remodel, and repair the breaches erected over time. Black women from all walks of life have been the most scrutinized having to defend themselves on every hand. Kimberly Fain writes in her writing titled, *Black Feminist Rhetoric in Beyoncé’s Homecoming. “*According to Harris-Perry, Black women’s experiences “are political because black women in America have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity” (5). (Fain).

Angelou gave every black girl the permission to dream big and the permission to shout it even louder. In sharing her wisdom and experiences over the years she gave many hope that pain can be repurposed. The circumstances weren’t meant to kill you, and what some thought was dirt to bury you was only fertilizer to help you grow. Angelou felt this was her responsibility to share with the world. Angelou has said, "somebody needs to tell young people, listen, I did this, and I did that. You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated." Caged Bird is sometimes considered essential reading for young students, and is on many required reading lists; however, the book has also proved controversial, because of its honest depictions of sexuality and Angelou's discussion of being raped as a child. This book was written in the early 1970's, at a time when autobiographies of women, and particularly black women, were a way of asserting the importance of women's lives and examining issues of particular importance to women. Angelou's book, although it is meant for a broad audience, is also concerned with conveying the difficulties of being black and a woman in America. Angelou addresses these issues in such a way that they appeal to all her readers for understanding and also speak to the particular segment of her audience that she represents. (Grade Saver) Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now is Maya’s tribute to help others repurpose their pain, find themselves and truly come into their own. Not allowing the world and its challenges to overtake them, but to overtake the world and shine brightly. To ascend beyond life’s circumstances and make your life what you want it. I leave you with one of Angelou’s poems.

**Still I Rise**

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I’ll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you beset with gloom?

’Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells

Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I’ll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?

Shoulders falling down like teardrops,

Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?

Don’t you take it awful hard

’Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines

Diggin’ in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I’ll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise

That I dance like I’ve got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history’s shame

I rise

Up from a past that’s rooted in pain

I rise

I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise

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