

Trauma of Racism in the Selected Poetry of Maya Angelou

Ekhlas Rahi Mashkooor

College of Science/ University of Al-Qadisyiah

07821154866/ Ekhlas.rahi@qu.edu.iq

Abstract

Trauma theory examines the literary representations of various forms of violence, oppression, and social upheavals since the last decade of the 20th century. Literature gives expression to the voiceless or those who are forced to be silent. To follow this line of thought, this paper seeks to shift attention by bringing contemporary psychological and cultural trauma theory to study selected poems by an African-American female writer who is a prominent figure in postcolonial literature. This paper also undertakes to explore feminist traumatology which is to make women's trauma visible, give meaning to it, and ultimately create framework that promote the healing of trauma. To do so, selected poems, "They Went Home", "Caged Bird", and "And Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou are selected. The results of the study show that the poet explores personal trauma in "They Went Home", examines the collective trauma of racial minorities in "Caged Bird", and analyzes the themes of survival and healing in "And Still I Rise".

Keywords: Trauma, Racism, Maya Angelou, Collective trauma

صدمة العنصرية في الشعر المختار لمايا أنجيلو

اخلاص راهي مشكور

كلية العلوم/جامعة القادسية

تدرس نظرية الصدمة التمثيلات الأدبية لأشكال العنف والقمع والاضطرابات الاجتماعية منذ العقد الأخير من القرن العشرين، يمنح الأدب صوتاً للمهمشين والمُسكتين. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحويل هذا المنظور من خلال تطبيق نظريات الصدمة النفسية والثقافية المعاصرة على قصائد مختارة للكاتبة الأفروأمريكية مايا أنجيلو، وهي شخصية بارزة في الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري. تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية أيضاً دراسة التراماتولوجيا النسوية التي تهدف إلى إبراز صدمات المرأة، وإعطاء معنى لها، ووضع إطار يعزز الشفاء من هذه الصدمات. ولتحقيق ذلك، تم اختيار قصائد معينة للشاعرة مايا أنجيلو وهي: (عادوا إلى ديارهم)، (الطائر الحبب) (وما زلت انهض). كشف نتائج الدراسة أن الشاعرة تستكشف الصدمة الشخصية في قصيدة (عادوا إلى ديارهم)، و(الطائر الحبب) تتناول الصدمة الجماعية للأقليات العرقية، و(وما زلت انهض) تركز على الصمود والشفاء، حيث كشفت النتائج كيف تعالج أنجيلو هذه الأبعاد المختلفة للصدمة في أعمالها الشعرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة، العنصرية، مايا أنجيلو، الصدمة الجماعية

Introduction:

This paper is an attempt to explore the trauma of racism in the selected poetry of Maya Angelou. "Maya Angelou is sometimes called a 'America's renaissance woman' as she is an author, poet, historian, songwriter, playwright, dancer,

stage and screen producer, director, performer, singer, and civil rights activist" (Janoušková, 2005, p.5). Maya Angelou was a writer that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s. Born as Marguerite Johnson in Missouri in 1928, she experiences family turmoil and nomadic upbringing. "Her parents divorced when she was three and, along with her brother, she was sent to live with their paternal grandmother in Arkansas (Kort, 2016, p.5). "The community she grew up in endured the worst of poverty and racial oppression and at the age of seven she was raped by her mother's boyfriend, forcing her into silence" (Kort, 2016, p.6).

In 1940, she found her voice in San Francisco where Johnson took Maya Angelou as her stage name as a singer and actor. In the 1960s, Angelou served as the leader for the northern sector of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and collaborated with leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. "On her 40th birthday in early 1968, her friend Dr. Martin Luther King was murdered, which further sent her into deep depression. All these traumatic happenings and experiences inadvertently found its way in all her works" (Preethi and Gayathri, 2022. P.2116). She published her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1970, which was nominated for the National Book Award, and several poetry collections in the following years (Kort, 2016). Among her volumes of poetry are: *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993), *And Still I Rise* (1987), *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990), *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (1983), *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975), and *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. All of these collections of poetry were published in one volume of poetry in 1994 as *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. More volumes of poetry have been published since but they are not going to be analyzed in this paper. Thanks to the poem "On the Pulse of Morning" which was a President Clinton's inauguration poem in 1993, Maya Angelou has become known world-wide. In the 1950s Maya Angelou moved to New York, where she joined the Harlem Writers Guild and took her place among the growing number of young black writers and artists associated with the Civil Rights Movement.

Theoretical Background:

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, trauma was originally a medical term used to refer to "a wound or an external bodily injury," or "a psychic injury, especially one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed" or "the state or condition so caused." But it has also become a word widely circulated in a more general and figurative use. Common to both the medical and the contemporary common use of the term, as well as to Freud's definition of trauma as a "breach" in the "protective barrier"

(1989, p.29) are the elements of shock and rupture. Bond and Craps (2019) refer to the inconsistencies in the definitions of the term which has characterized the term throughout its history, contending that, “Yet, for all its ubiquity, the definition of trauma remains unstable. The transition from professional to popular discourse has arguably led to a loss of specificity in its meaning and application” (p. 4). Richard Crownshaw (2010) notes that, “despite ongoing debate, critics generally agree that trauma is that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation’ (p.4).

Etymologically originating from the Greek “τραῦμα” meaning “wound”, trauma was first defined as early as 1684 in a physiological sense as a specifically external bodily injury. The onset of modernity and the development of the railroad in 1815, however, brought with it a reconsideration of trauma. The public’s awareness of the rising number of railway accidents and the strange reverberations of their aftermath meant that concerns about the negative effects of long-distance railway travel began circulating quickly (Maurer, 2014, p.11). Danish surgeon John Erichsen (1995) supported the idea of trauma as a physical wound, claiming that “a severe jarring or shaking of the spine and its contents could result in a partial suspension of spinal cord function similar to the transient partial or complete loss of consciousness associated with brain Concussion” (p.189).

Herbert Page (1896), however, argued against this purely physiological thesis stating in 1875 that “patients with spinal concussion actually had little more than traumatic lumbago or nervous disturbance with overtones of simulation or hysteria” (p.158) whilst noting that “real and alleged injuries could be aggravated by claimants seeking generous compensation” (p.158). In addition to those who defined trauma as a pre-existing mental hysteria that was only aggravated by railway-induced spinal movement, As Shoshana Ringel (2012) points out, it was neurologist “Jean Martin Charcot who was the first to understand that the origin of hysterical symptoms was not physiological but rather psychological in nature” (p.1). Diverging from the dominant understanding of trauma as a uterine condition manifesting itself as hysteria, Charcot noted that traumatic events could induce a hypnotic state in his patients; subsequently surmising that “hysterical attacks are dissociative problems, the results of having endured unbearable experiences”(qtd. in Ringel, 2012, p. 1). Charcot’s hypothesis saw popular conceptions of trauma move from the physiological to the mental; a shift reflected by the changing treatments of hysteria during this period. Studies of trauma subsequently saw an etiological drive, spearheaded by the work of Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet.

Undoubtedly informed by Charcot, Freud explained trauma as the psychic consequence of a sexual experience – emphatically stating that “infantile sexual experiences are the fundamental precondition for hysteria” (qtd. in Gay p.106).

But whilst Janet's ideas posited the emergence of hysteria as purely reactionary to the experience of childhood sexual molestation, Freud's famed seduction theory – in which experiences of sexual violation in childhood were recalled later in life through the acquisition of knowledge that rendered that memory traumatic- implied that trauma was pathological. The pathology, claimed Freud, lay in the existence of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action). Traumatic memories, insisted Freud, acquired their character as such through a belated conferral of meaning by the unconscious that would manifest itself in hysterical symptoms. Freud eventually dismissed seduction theory altogether, and his writing is evidence of the extensive vacillation his thinking around trauma represented (p.107). But whilst the idea of *Nachträglichkeit* became a cornerstone of literary trauma theory, the shifting of the locus of trauma from the event to the individual suggested a new interplay between agency, history and memory in relation to trauma.

Patricia Resick (2001) in reference to early twentieth century psychologist, Pierre Janet, explains that, “traumatic events cause vehement emotions which prevent the person from matching the event with existing mental schemes” (p. 62). She maintains that, “because the memories of the event cannot be integrated into personal awareness, they are split off, or dissociated from consciousness” (p. 62). It could be understood from these explanations that, memories associated with traumatic experiences are often distorted and the sense of self is rather incoherent, where the victim suffers from mental dissociation.

Trauma theory has gained academic status for examining literary representations of various forms of violence, oppression, and social upheavals since the last decade of the 20th century. The main theorists of the field are such pioneer thinkers as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, Judith Herman. However its empirical basis has been mostly in Holocaust, for example Bernard Donal's *Between Witness and Testimony: the Holocaust and the Limits of Representation*, Primo Levi's *Holocaust, Acts of Memory* edited by Mieke Bal which dedicates most chapters to Germans, Jews and Holocaust victims. Radstone (2007) observes that, “it is the sufferings of those, categorized in the west as other, that tend not to be addressed via trauma theory” (p.25). Stef Craps (2019) verifies this notion; the founding texts of the field including Caruth's own work largely fail to live up to the promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement; they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-western or minority cultures (p.46).

Apart from trauma critics who are mostly involved with identifying the trauma of the groups of people labeled as ethnic others, there are a number of feminist critics who deal with the psychic wounds of the women. Kaplan (2005) believes that trauma studies have not often discussed issues like the “family

trauma, the “trauma of loss, abandonment, rejection, betrayal” (p.19). For her, these traumatic events are usually neglected because the main focus has been on traumas perpetrated or suffered by men, rather than women, children or whole families. Thus, the traumas suffered by women are rarely considered because of this gendering of trauma (p.19). Following this line of thought, Laura S. Brown (1995) points out that what is defined as ‘the range of human experience’ is “what is normal and usual in the lives of men of a dominant class: white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men” (p.101).

Trauma studies seem to have been Eurocentric in orientation often overlooking marginalized nations whose voices have been suppressed by colonial domination.. Sun et al. (2007) have argued: “It is a commonplace to think of literature as something that gives expression to the voiceless or to that which could not make itself heard before” (p.1). To follow this line of thought, this paper seeks to shift attention by bringing contemporary psychological and cultural trauma theory to study selected poems by a colored female writer. It supports the aim of contemporary feminist traumatology which is to make women’s trauma visible, give meaning to it, and ultimately create framework that promote the healing of trauma. Craps (2019) also points out that, "today the relevance of literary trauma theory to feminist literature has become particularly pronounced, in light of the diverse forms of violence that women are increasingly facing in volatile contemporary situation" (p.44).

The traumatic impact of racism and other forms of ongoing oppression could be explored through W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here, Du Bois coined and explained the term “double-consciousness”; "this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others" (1994. P. 2). She also maintains that, "One ever feels his twoness, An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife" (1994. P.5). Du Bois also notes the "poverty, ignorance, the accumulated sloth and shirking and awkwardness of decades and centuries and the red stain of bastardy.... divided black consciousness" (1994, 5). But whilst Du Bois first used the term “double consciousness” in the context of race, another influential figure introduced the concept to colonial and postcolonial theory. Frantz Fanon writes, "colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?' " (2001, p.57).

For Fanon, colonial and postcolonial trauma is a condition intrinsically linked to identity; the identificatory schism engendered by colonialism, he argues, is not a singular experience, but a *state of being*. Writing from the midst of the Algerian war, Fanon both experiences and theorizes trauma in a markedly different way from his Euro/American contemporaries. "Fanon claims that in the case of colonial trauma, there is no one limit experience; the political and social conditions engendered by racial subjugation create a continuous

accumulation and enhancement of traumatic stressors" (Bubenechik, 2013, p.21). In addition, identity formation in the colonial setting - as delineated in Fanon's work - is far from a stable or unambiguous process; it is, as Homi Bhabha writes, "a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (2004, p.52).

Discussion

Maya Angelou in some of her poems deals with the impact of trauma, especially the trauma of racism, sexual abuse, and poverty. Like the majority of colored women in postcolonial context, she struggled with all these issues throughout her life. Her literary oeuvre examines these themes thoroughly and in detail to gain a profound understanding of how these experiences shaped her identity and how she found resilience and empowerment through self-expression and go through the process of healing. Some of Angelou's poetry depicts the journey from psychic wounds to healing.

This paper presents a more detailed look at how trauma and healing is represented in her poetry; to do so, the paper analyzes and studies her selected poetry in terms of personal trauma and its impact, trauma as a collective experience, and the process of healing.

Angelou experienced sexual abuse in her early childhood; this psychic wound left her silenced for several years. It is a recurrent theme in some of her poetry including *They Went Home*. She examines the muting effect of trauma and the long-term impact on her sense of self and identity formation;

"They went home and told their wives,
that never once in all their lives, had
they known a girl like me, But ...
.....They went home
They said my house was licking clean,
no word I spoke was ever mean,
I had an air of mystery,
But . . . They went home." (Angelou, 7).

In these lines, Angelou contemplates on her being reduced to a sex object by white men. It shows how the experience of sexual abuse in her childhood negatively impacted her identity formation. The poet utilizes the stylistic device of repetition in "They went home" which is also the title of the poem. Whitehead (2004) points out that, "trauma narratives are characterized by

repetition and indirection...Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (p. 38). The emotional feelings of depression, humiliation, and rejection is echoed through the repetition of these words. “Freud points out, these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual’s own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control” (Caruth, 1996, p. 2).

Trauma as a Collective Experience in Maya Angelou's poetry deals with racism and racial discrimination. As an African-American writer and social activist, she is concerned with systematic and collective trauma of people of her race. In several poems including

Caged Bird, she talks about the oppression and discrimination faced by colored minority groups trying to highlight the collective trauma of slavery and its consequences. According to Gilad Hirschberger (2018), "the term *collective trauma* refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people" (p.24). A traumatic event could involve a large group of people in a community. In this sense collective trauma refers to psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society. Whatever the cause of a disaster, be it man-made or natural, accidental or deliberate, its impact may extend beyond those immediately affected by the destruction. Erikson (1995) distinguishes between individual and collective trauma, explaining the former as “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively” (p.187) and, the latter, as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (p.187).

"The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own
But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing". (Angelou)

In this poem, Angelou compares the life of two birds, one is free and fortunate representing the white Americans, the other is caged which portrays the life of enslaved and unfortunate African-Americans." By using metaphors of birds (a symbol of freedom), the poet shows the inequality and lack of justice seen in society during her life. Angelou thus depicts the miserable life of the African American people when they had nothing left except for their voices to sing of hope or to raise a voice against the ill-treatment they received" (Caitlinjessica). This famous poem, " the Caged Bird Sings," utilizes the stylistic devices of the metaphor of a caged bird to illustrate the restrictions and oppression experienced by Black people, focusing on the collective trauma of slavery and its heritage. The caged bird's struggle to sing despite its confinement reflects the resilience and yearning for freedom in the face of adversity.

In some of her poems including "Still I Rise" the themes of Survival and resilience are expressed. The poet found resilience and empowerment through self-expression and go through the process of healing. Trauma critics consider trauma as a silent and voiceless experience. In her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, Cathy Caruth suggests "trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language" (3). She goes on to elaborate on this "insolvability" by stating: "trauma is an injury to the psyche that language often fails to adequately represent or express" (76). Other critics have pointed to the same difficulty in representing traumatic experience, Ronell declares that, "trauma can be experienced in at least two ways....as a memory that one cannot integrate into one's own experience; and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to the others" (313). The lack of verbal competence is acknowledged by Herman as well: "The excessive arousal of emotions in trauma victims leaves them almost mute. These memories remain wordless and static" (175). However the necessity of expressing the feelings of grief in the recovery process is confirmed; for example, Adorno in "Commitment" praises art for its beneficial effects , "it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it" (318). However, through poetry, Maya Angelou finds a safe and healthy way to express her intense emotions. The hopeful poem of " Still I Rise" contains and transmits the spirit of resilience and survival against oppression, showing the power of hope and self-confidence in the face of problems. As Maher and Hashim (2023) explain, "armed with hope, self-confidence, and pride in the heritage inherited from her African ancestors, Angelou endeavored to liberate herself and her black people from the cage of racial discrimination that had previously spoiled the daily life of black Americans" (p.19).

"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.

....

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

.....

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.

.....

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" (Angelou).

According to Petra Janoušková (2005), "first generations of enslaved black people had to learn how to survive in the most bizarre and horrible conditions. The knowledge and strength they acquired is being passed on and on until today" (p. 26). The author also maintains that, "Nevertheless, the route towards liberation was not easy and many black people encountered lots of defeats and losses, they tried not to be defeated and remained erect" (p. 26). Maya Angelou has always been very impressed by the survival of her black ancestors and previous generations, especially when she thinks about all misfortunes and then she remembers where she is now and what she has inherited. "Angelou's poetry pays tribute to "her people". She has always been amazed by their survival that has been possible only through many decades of hard work, strong will and courage. The numerous deaths of well-known people ...have gradually had a huge impact on the liberation of more recent generations" (Janoušková, 2005, p. 34). In this emotionally charged poem, through different images and figures of speech like similes and metaphors, like dust, like air, the poet conveys the

strong impact of trauma in her life, her ability to heal from trauma, find strength in life miseries, and reclaim one's voice.

Conclusion

In order to help identifying the trauma of the groups of people labeled as ethnic others, this paper analyzed three poems by Maya Angelou, namely, "They Went Home", "Caged Bird", and "And Still I Rise". This paper presented a more detailed look at how trauma and healing is represented in her poetry; to do so, the paper analyzes and studies her selected poetry in terms of personal trauma and its impact, trauma as a collective experience, and the process of healing. Angelou experienced sexual abuse in her early childhood; this psychic wound left her silenced for several years. It is a recurrent theme in some of her poetry including *They Went Home*. She examines the muting effect of trauma and the long-term impact on her sense of self and identity formation. Trauma as a Collective Experience in Maya Angelou's poetry deals with racism and racial discrimination. As an African-American writer and social activist, she is concerned with systematic and collective trauma of people of her race. In several poems including "Caged Bird", she talks about the oppression and discrimination faced by colored minority groups trying to highlight the collective trauma of slavery and its consequences.

Angelou's poetry is ultimately a celebration of resilience and the human capacity to overcome adversity. She demonstrates how individuals can transform pain into power and find strength through self-expression. In "Still I Rise", she encourages individuals to reclaim their stories and narratives, challenging dominant narratives that seek to silence or distort their experiences.

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