THE POETICS OF CELEBRATING AFRICAN HUMANHOOD USING MAYA ANGELOU AND IFI AMADIUME'S POETRY

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AN ESSAY SUBMITTRD TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE, FACULTY OF ARTS UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BRNIN CITY, IN PARTICULAR FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A HONS) DEGREE IN ENGLISH AND LITERATURE.

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CERTIFICATION

I certify that this study titled The Poetics of Celebrating African Humanhood in the Poetry of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume was carried out by Christabel Osasogie IGBOKWE (MISS) in the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin City, under my supervision.

_____ _____

Dr. Samson Eguavoen **Date**
(Project Supervisor)

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and the source of all wisdom and knowledge.

It is also lovingly dedicated to my wonderful parents, Mum and Dad, for their unwavering love, support, and encouragement

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My deepest gratitude goes to Almighty God, who has given me strength and encouragement throughout my wonderful yet challenging years at the University. I am truly grateful for His unconditional love, abundant grace, and constant provision.

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My deepest appreciation also goes to my loving parents for their unwavering support, prayers, and sacrifices throughout this journey. I pray that God blesses them with long life, good health, and the joy of reaping the fruits of their labour, in Jesus' name. I am equally thankful to all my siblings for their love, care, and constant encouragement in times of need.

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TABLE OF CONTENT

CHAPTER THREE: CELEBRATING AFRICAN HUMANHOOD THROUGH REJECTING HEGEMONIC NORMS

CHAPTER FOUR: CELEBRATING AFRICAN HUMANHOOD THROUGH EMPOWERING VOICE AND TONE

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

ABSTRACT

Poetics refers to the artistic principles and creative techniques that govern the composition of poetry, including the use of form, rhythm, imagery, tone, and language to convey meaning and emotion. The poetics of African humanhood, therefore, describes the artistic and philosophical expression through which African poets celebrate the dignity, identity, and spiritual wholeness of African people, while resisting cultural erasure and colonial domination.This study examines The Poetics of Celebrating African Humanhood using Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume's Poetry, arguing that both poets employ poetic form, imagery, and rhythm to affirm the dignity and identity of African and Black people against colonial and patriarchal oppression. The study is limited to the analysis of selected poems — Angelou's Phenomenal Woman, Still I Rise, Weekend Glory, and Our Grandmothers; and Amadiume's Nok Lady in Terracotta, Mistress of My Own Being, We Have Even Lost Our Tongues, Be Brothers, "Bloody masculinity" and Creation. Using a qualitative research method, the poems are analyzed through close textual and thematic reading to uncover how poetic language expresses African-centered values. The study adopts Afrocentric Theory and the Ubuntu philosophy as its theoretical framework to foreground African perspectives and communal identity.Findings reveal that the technical elements of voice, rhythm, and repetition serve as vehicles for psychological and emotional restoration. In Angelou's Still I Rise, the repetitive refrain "I rise" transforms trauma into an act of healing and self-assertion. Similarly, Amadiume's Creation employs cyclical imagery such as "seed took root again" to symbolize renewal and resilience. Both poets use affirmative, rhythmic voices to democratize dignity and restore faith in African self-worth. The study concludes that the poetics of celebrating African humanhood in their works is defined by a shared aesthetic of resistance, empowerment, and spiritual wholeness—transforming poetry into a lasting testimony of African strength and identity.

CHAPTER ONE

THE POETICS OF CELEBRATING AFRICAN HUMANHOOD IN MAYA ANGELOU'S AND IFI AMADIUME'S POETRY

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the poetics of celebrating African humanhood in the selected poems of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume. Their works highlight themes of resilience, dignity, while resisting colonial and hegemonic oppression. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Black women and affirming their humanity, both poets emphasize self-definition, empowerment, and the reclamation of African values and heritage.

1.2 Scope of the Study

This study is limited to examining the poetics of celebrating African humanhood in selected poems by Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume. It focuses specifically on Angelou's Phenomenal Woman, Still I Rise, Weekend Glory, and Our Grandmothers, as well as Amadiume's "Nok Lady in Terracotta", "Mistress of my own being", " We have even lost our Tongues", "Be Brothers ", " Bloody masculinity", "Creation ".The analysis centers on how these poems employ poetic devices and language to affirm African identity, dignity, and resistance to colonial and hegemonic oppression. This study does not extend to a comprehensive examination of the poets' full bodies of work or their biographical backgrounds but is strictly confined to a literary and thematic analysis of the aforementioned poems.

1.3 Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is the qualitative research method. This method involves the critical analysis of data collected from selected poems written by Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume. Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, themes, and poetic expressions. Through this method, the study will examine how the poets use poetic devices to express themes related to African humanhood, identity, and resistance.

1.4 Theoretical Background

This study adopts a combination of the Afrocentric theoretical framework and the Ubuntu philosophy.

On the one hand, the term Afrocentricity was first coined by Molefi Kete Asante in the early 1980s. According to Asante, Afrocentricity is "a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate (2)." It seeks to reposition African people at the center of their own historical and cultural narrative, rather than viewing themselves through a Eurocentric lens.

Central to Afrocentricity is the concept of Njia (sometimes rendered as Nija), which Asante describes as the collective expression of the Afrocentric worldview, grounded in the historical experiences of African people. Njia forms the philosophical core of Afrocentricity, providing a pathway through which African people redefine themselves and their lived experiences. Over centuries, African and African-descended scholars,

thinkers, and activists have contributed to shaping this worldview, creating a framework that reflects African cultural heritage, values, and aspirations.

By re-centering African thought systems, Afrocentricity challenges the marginalization of African knowledge and affirms the dignity, agency, and humanity of African people. In the context of this study, it provides a lens through which African identity, humanhood, and self-definition can be critically examined and celebrated.

On the other hand, Ubuntu is a term rooted in the Nguni Bantu languages, particularly Zulu and Xhosa, most directly translated into English as “humanity” or “humanness.” Its sense is perhaps best conveyed by the expression umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, which means “a person is a person through other people.” Originating from the Bantu peoples of southern Africa, the philosophy is now shared across much of the continent, with parallels in many other African languages.

At its core, Ubuntu describes a set of closely related African value systems that emphasize communalism, shared values, mutual care, and the interconnectedness of human existence. It reflects the African worldview that an individual’s identity is inherently tied to their community and relationships, and often carries the philosophical belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. It is sometimes translated as “I am because we are,” “I am because you are,” or “humanity towards others.”

Ubuntu is best understood as a social philosophy built on principles of care and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness, as well as the interdependence between individuals, society, and the physical world. Historically, it has

been described as a philosophy of peace and became a guiding concept of the African Renaissance promoted by leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and Thabo Mbeki. In post-apartheid South Africa, it played a significant role in educational and public service reforms and provided a moral framework for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which addressed the injustices of the apartheid era from the perspectives of both perpetrators and victims.

Building on the foundational concepts of Afrocentricity and Ubuntu, this study recognizes their deep philosophical alignment and complementary roles in shaping African identity, humanhood, and social cohesion. Afrocentricity's core mission to reposition African people at the center of their own historical and cultural narratives resonates strongly with Ubuntu's emphasis on communal relationships and shared humanity. Both frameworks reject Eurocentric individualism, promoting instead a collective identity rooted in mutual responsibility and interconnectedness.

The concept of Njia, central to Afrocentricity, embodies the pathway through which African peoples reclaim their cultural heritage and redefine their lived experiences grounded in historical realities. Ubuntu, encapsulated in the phrase umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu ("a person is a person through other people"), offers the ethical and social expression of these reclaimed identities through lived practices of empathy, care, and communal solidarity.

This fusion provides a holistic framework for examining African identity that is both intellectual and practical. Afrocentricity supplies the epistemological foundation affirming African knowledge systems and cultural pride, while Ubuntu provides the lived, relational ethos that binds individuals within their communities. Together, they foster social cohesion, restorative justice, and collective well-being, as evidenced in traditional practices such as communal labor, conflict resolution through reconciliation, and respect for ancestors, which continue to shape social dynamics across African societies.

Importantly, this integrated perspective is dynamic and responsive to contemporary challenges facing African youths and urban communities, including secularism, globalization, and modernization, which influence identity formation. As noted in recent studies, African identity is neither static nor isolated but evolves through ongoing negotiation between inherited cultural values and present-day realities. Afrocentricity and Ubuntu, therefore, offer tools not only for reclaiming African agency but also for navigating these complex socio-cultural shifts, fostering a resilient and inclusive sense of selfhood.

In the context of this study, weaving Afrocentricity and Ubuntu together creates a powerful lens to explore African humanhood and poetics as simultaneously grounded in cultural heritage and oriented towards communal empowerment and future transformation. This synergy emphasizes that African identity is not solely a matter of individual self-realization but is fundamentally sustained and expressed through collective relationships, mutual care, and shared cultural values.

Babacar Mbaye's thoughts on the Afrocentric concept are not too different from other scholars. For him, slavery and colonization not only displaced Africa's human and economic resources to the Western world, but the present conditions of Black people created the incentives for the Afrocentric theory to claim "legitimate counter-attacks to Western hegemony" (86). Mazama has a similar point of view, but she describes the rationale for the theory's evolution as an attempt to solve a common problem facing people of African descent across the world. For Mazama (387), the problem is the "unconscious adoption of the Western worldview and perspective and their attendant conceptual frameworks" by African people, and the attempt to address this problem is what introduced the Afrocentric idea into the scholarly lexicon. In fact, Ama Mazama's conceptual lamentation of the invasion of the African cultural values, ideas, and identity by European cultural ethos, as Molefi Asante has articulated in his earlier works as other Afrocentric thinkers (Karenga and Alkebulan), reminds one of the difficult position challenges facing Africans and the African diaspora in the contemporary era.

Linus Hoskins' (Kwame Nantambu) idea on the Afrocentric ideology is similar to the founding idea of Asante, but Hoskins takes a rather radical approach in defining the concept. For Hoskins, the process of Afrocentricity provides African people the opportunity "to go back to the dawn to human history in order to de-Europeanize/detoxify/demystify/debrainwash their subconscious mind-set of this invisible drug called Eurocentric miseducation… with the correct knowledge, information, and interpretation of the rich, glorious and dynastical history, scientific

inventions, humane communal modus vivendi, …and unmatched intellectual acumen of their African ancestors" (252). The apparently tall order for a turnaround mind-set for all people of African descent is of course attainable, but the question of how it could be attained and under what circumstances, and whether the Afrocentric paradigm represents the embodiment of the intrinsic complexities (history, culture/experiences) of Africa and people of African descent, is perhaps the biggest challenge and source of contentious scholarly debates on the theory.

Mogobe Bernard Ramose contribution to Ubuntu philosophy lies in his view that Ubuntu is the root of African ontology and epistemology, where being is understood as relational and dynamic rather than fragmented. For him, personhood is not inherent at birth but acquired through community life and rites of passage, making the individual a human only in relation to others. He contrasts the Western "I think, therefore I am" with the African "we think," stressing communal existence as the foundation of knowledge and morality. Ubuntu, therefore, is both philosophy and praxis: it affirms one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others, grounding African law, politics, and religion in consensus, harmony, and the lived practice of humanhood.

Desmond Tutu's contributions to the Ubuntu philosophy are reflected in the values he consistently upheld and practiced. He emphasized the idea of interconnectedness, captured in the expression "I am because we are," to show that the well-being of every individual is inseparable from the well-being of others. For Tutu, compassion was central to Ubuntu, as he believed that to live a good life requires caring for others as one cares

for oneself. He also advanced forgiveness as a tool for healing and reconciliation, clarifying that forgiveness does not condone wrongdoing but frees people from being controlled by past wrongs. In addition, he linked Ubuntu to the pursuit of social justice, advocating for the dignity and rights of all people and encouraging the courage to stand for what is right. As Chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu put these values into practice by promoting reconciliation between victims and perpetrators of apartheid. Through these efforts, he gave practical expression to Ubuntu and demonstrated its power as a framework for unity, healing, and justice.

Nelson Mandela's contributions to the Ubuntu philosophy are reflected in the way he lived and led as South Africa's first black president. He described Ubuntu as the essence of being human, rooted in compassion, understanding, reconciliation, forgiveness, and respect, and he believed it was the key to building a just and equitable society. Mandela exemplified these values by forgiving his oppressors after twenty-seven years in prison and choosing instead to work for equality and reconciliation. He was a compassionate leader who cared deeply about the well-being of all South Africans, and he acted as a bridge-builder by bringing people together across racial and ethnic divisions. His fight for justice and equality for all, regardless of race, gender, or religion, further expressed his commitment to Ubuntu. In his inaugural speech, he declared that South Africa would never again experience the oppression of one by another, reinforcing his vision of unity and dignity. Through his life, writings, and leadership, Mandela demonstrated the spirit of Ubuntu and left a legacy of hope, compassion, and justice.

The relevance of Afrocentricity and Ubuntu to this research lies in their capacity to provide a culturally grounded framework for analyzing the selected poems of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume. Afrocentricity makes it possible to interpret the poems as acts of self-definition and resistance against Eurocentric marginalization, thereby affirming African identity and agency in poetic expression. Ubuntu, on the other hand, highlights how the poems embody values of compassion, solidarity, and communal humanhood. Together, these theories are relevant because they enable a reading of the poems not only as literary works but also as cultural voices that celebrate African poetics and human dignity.

1.5 Literature Review

Diah Rachmawati's study as quoted in (Gayathri 248) investigates the use of imagery and symbolism in Maya Angelou's poems "Still I Rise" and " I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings". Her study draws on the theories of imagery, symbolism, and racial prejudice, the study identifies kinesthetic, organic, and visual imagery in "Still I Rise" and auditory, organic, and visual imagery in " I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings". Through a structural approach, the analysis highlights the contrast between oppression and freedom, revealing how Angelou's imagery exposes the racial cruelty, prejudice, and inhumanity experienced by African Americans. This perspective is relevant to my research because it demonstrates how Angelou employs poetic devices not only to portray injustice but also to affirm dignity and resilience, which are themes central to the celebration of humanhood. However, while Rachmawati emphasizes the stylistic and structural

elements of Angelou's poetry, her study does not examine the wider affirmation of African humanhood that my work addresses, nor does it compare Angelou's vision with that of Ifi Amadiume. Furthermore, her study does not employ Afrocentric and Ubuntu frameworks, which are essential to the theoretical grounding of my research.

Diah B.P Sembiring adopted descriptive analysis to explore feministic concepts in Maya Angelou's poems, including "Still I Rise", "Woman Work," "Remembrance", "Phenomenal Woman," "Men" "Equality," and "Caged Bird". The study revealed instances of women's oppression under patriarchy and emphasized how Angelou's poetic voices embody resilience by confronting and resisting male dominance. This is relevant to the present research because it highlights themes of feminism, resistance, and survival, which are also central to the idea of African humanhood. However, the study is limited in scope. It largely concentrates on women's struggles against patriarchy, without engaging with the racial dimension of Angelou's work or the wider communal philosophy of African survival and identity. Thus, it leaves a gap that this research seeks to address by extending the analysis beyond gender to encompass race and Afrocentric notions of humanhood.

Similarly, Idiani Eka Permatasari examined "Phenomenal Woman", "Caged Bird," and "Still I Rise", using feminist theory alongside biographical and historical approaches. The study addressed both feminist and racial concerns, identifying various strands of feminism within Angelou's work, Marxist and Radical in "Still I Rise" and "Caged Bird," and Liberal in Phenomenal Woman. It further portrayed Angelou as a pioneer who

condemned enslavement and envisioned the liberation of Black people. This study is significant for the present research because it illustrates how Angelou's poetry weaves together feminist struggles and racial emancipation, thereby affirming identity and survival. Nonetheless, the analysis is largely framed within Western feminist categories and Kennedy and Gioia's theoretical perspective, leaving a gap in relation to Afrocentric and Ubuntu philosophy. This research intends to bridge that gap by situating Angelou's poetic vision within the framework of African humanhood, emphasizing not only individual resilience but also collective survival and dignity.

According to Mamuna Ghani, as quoted in (Gayathri 251) Maya Angelou's poetry reflects a profound state of resistance to post-colonialism. Post-colonialism examines the lingering effects of colonial dominance on oppressed peoples and their territories, including the psychological, behavioral, and socioeconomic impacts of such oppression. While Ghani did not focus on specific poems, the study analyzed Angelou's works for qualities indicative of resistance to racial discrimination and injustice. Angelou's poems portray the complexities of Afro-American life, addressing issues such as racial disparities, socio-psychological inferiority, cultural subordination, the significance of self-determination, and the need for emancipation. The research highlighted the influence of white cultural dominance on black identity, self-worth, and values, revealing various dichotomies within her poetry, including black and white, depravity and authority, feminine and masculine, minor and major, and self versus others. Ghani emphasized that Angelou's works gave African Americans, particularly black women, a platform to

articulate their struggles and assert their dignity in the face of systemic prejudice and oppression, recognizing her as a revolutionary author and poet who courageously addressed racial injustice, white authority, and historical enslavement. However, while Ghani's study highlights Angelou's resistance to post-colonialism and racial discrimination, it does not explore how her poetry reflects the broader concept of African humanhood, particularly in terms of survival, identity, and resilience. This aspect is central to the present study, which examines how Angelou celebrates the dignity, fortitude, and enduring humanity of black people within an Afrocentric framework.

Ria Resky Hardianti llham study as quoted in (Gayathri 251) examined Maya Angelou's poems through the lens of racism, focusing on their textual structure and content. The analysis covered selected poems such as "America," "Africa," "Ain't That Bad," "My Guilt," "Riot: 60s," "Harlem Hopscotch," "On Working White Liberal," "One More Round," "Our Grandmother," "Sepia Fashion Show," "The Calling of Names," "The Thirteen (Black)," and "The Thirteen (White)." The investigation revealed Angelou's attitude of perseverance in the face of racism and highlighted the minimal but persistent presence of racial conflict in her works. Ilham concluded that Angelou's poetry depicts circumstances of racism and slavery, encompassing themes such as prejudice, class strife, isolation, supremacy, and subjugation.

While this study is valuable in highlighting Angelou's portrayal of racial conflict, its scope remains limited to the thematic representation of racism. It does not extend to a broader examination of Angelou's works within the framework of African humanhood or

Afrocentric poetics. This creates a gap that the present study seeks to address. My research shifts the focus from racism to the celebration of African humanhood, resilience, and communal values, exploring how both Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume articulate a poetics that resists colonial oppression and affirms African identity. By incorporating the Afrocentric theoretical perspective, my study contributes a fresh dimension to the discourse on Angelou's and Amadiume's poetry, offering a comparative analysis that moves beyond conflict to emphasize affirmation, cultural reclamation, and the celebration of African humanity.

Rajeev Shrestha and Anjila Chamling as quoted in (Gayathri 253) investigated Maya Angelou's writings, emphasizing how she transcended the traumatic occurrences both around and within her. Their study did not focus on any specific poems but rather assessed Angelou's works through the lens of resilience. They illustrated how Angelou, as an African American woman, endured personal and collective trauma while creating her identity. The researchers presented Angelou as a model of fortitude and adaptability, asserting that her life and growth path would not have been fulfilled without her perseverance. According to Shrestha and Chamling, Angelou's internalization of trauma became a motivating force that enabled her to achieve survival and development. Their study also demonstrated how writing allowed Angelou to comprehend her past and carve a way through it, ultimately portraying her as a symbol of optimism, bravery, and resiliency.

While Shrestha and Chamling's study provides a significant contribution by highlighting Angelou's resilience and survival through trauma, it remains restricted to a psychological reading of her works without reference to specific poems. Furthermore, it does not explore the Afrocentric dimensions of her poetry or extend the analysis to African humanhood. This creates a gap that my study addresses by examining how both Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume celebrate African humanhood in their works. Unlike Shrestha and Chamling, my research situates the poets within an Afrocentric framework, focusing on how their writings resist colonial oppression and affirm African identity, resilience, and communal values.

Petra Janouskova as quoted in (Gayathri 252) draws attention to the theme of survival in Maya Angelou's poetry. Instead of focusing on a single poem, her study analyzed Angelou's works collectively, organizing them around terms related to survival. Black women's adversity, dignity, and fortitude reflected their belief in survival. Angelou's poems, often odes, incorporated humor, religious elements, and melody, which helped define the concept of survival. Her poetry tells stories of existence, emphasizes the significance of women's identity in the fight for liberty, and portrays figures like her grandmother as sources of light amid chaos. Most of her writing also explored how culture shapes behavior among people.

This discussion of survival, identity, and cultural influence is relevant to the present study because it highlights aspects of African humanhood particularly how resilience, dignity, and cultural grounding shape the experiences and expressions of African women. While

Janouskova focuses on survival broadly, this study builds on her work by examining how Angelou's poetic representation of survival contributes specifically to the celebration of African humanhood.

Kola Eke offers one of the few sustained academic readings of Ifi Amadiume's poetic work in "Responses to Patriarchy in African Women's Poetry." His comparative approach engages Amadiume's poems such as "Mistress of My Own Being" as explicit responses to patriarchal hegemony, interpreting them through a feminist lens that foregrounds their resistance to gendered oppression. However, Eke's analysis, while insightful, remains limited in scope, focusing on a select few poems and offering only cursory thematic readings without delving into poetics, stylistic strategies, or the broader formal and aesthetic dimensions of Amadiume's verse. There is thus a lack of comprehensive, close-textual, and stylistically oriented literary criticism of Amadiume's poetry. My study aims to fill this gap by offering deeper, verse-by-verse analysis of her major poems, illuminating how form, imagery, and voice articulate Afrocentric philosophy and the Ubuntu notion of humanhood.

Unoma Azuah, as a contemporary Nigerian writer and critic of African feminist literature, does not analyze Amadiume's poetry directly but her critical and creative engagement with Amadiume's anthropological insights (notably in Male Daughters, Female Husbands) offers valuable interpretive frameworks. Critics of Azuah's fiction illustrate how Amadiume's anthropological narratives inform fictional explorations of gender-bending, relational personhood, and female embodiment. While this connection is indirect, it

situates Amadiume's poetic concerns such as reconfiguring gender, humanhood, and power in broader fictional and narrative contexts. Since Azuah's engagement does not focus on Amadiume's own poems but on their anthropological applications in fiction, there remains an absence of literary critique that draws directly from Azuah's thematic frameworks to interpret Amadiume's poetic imagery and themes. My project fills this void by bridging that gap: applying Afrocentric and Ubuntu-inflected readings (as visible in Azuah's fiction) directly to the texts of Amadiume's poetry.

1.6 Thesis Statement

The research argues that Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume's poetry define the poetics for celebrating African humanhood through poetic defiance against colonial systems, rejecting hegemonic norms, empowering voice and tone.

CHAPTER TWO

CELEBRATING AFRICAN HUMANHOOD THROUGH POETIC DEFIANCE AGAINST COLONIAL SYSTEMS

The selected poems of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume reveal how poetry functions as a site of resistance against colonial erasure and oppression. Both poets use language not only to assert individual dignity but also to recover communal memory and cultural pride. Their works demonstrate that celebrating African humanhood requires the dismantling of narratives imposed by slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy. By drawing upon imagery, rhythm, spirituality, and ancestral memory, Angelou and Amadiume transform poetry into a vehicle of defiance. This chapter therefore examines how their use of cultural imagery, affirmations of pride and spirituality, and reconnection to ancestry serve as poetic strategies that resist colonial systems while affirming the fullness of African identity.

2.1 Cultural Imagery and Traditional References as Resistance

The poetry of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume demonstrates how cultural imagery and traditional references serve as deliberate strategies of resistance, reclaiming African humanhood from colonial and Western erasure. Through powerful affirmations of the body, ancestry, and cultural heritage, their works reject externally imposed ideals and assert the inherent dignity and vitality of African life.

Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" is a profound act of resistance against Western beauty standards that have historically denigrated African features. The speaker centers the source of her worth not in external validation but in the inherent, magnetic quality of her natural attributes. The poem rejects the shallow ideal of the "fashion model's size,"

instead affirming the cultural power embedded in her movement and form. This focus on bodily autonomy and self-definition is illustrated in the declaration:

> I walk into a room
>
> Just as cool as you please,
>
> And to a man,
>
> The fellows stand or
>
> Fall down on their knees.
>
> Then they swarm around me,
>
> A hive of honey bees.
>
> I say,
>
> It's the fire in my eyes,
>
> And the flash of my teeth,
>
> The swing in my waist,
>
> And the joy in my feet.
>
> I'm a woman
>
> Phenomenally.
>
> Phenomenal woman,
>
> That's me (3).

This imagery transforms specific physical attributes—the fire, the flash, the swing, and the joy—into emblems of an unbroken, self-possessed resilience. The poem insists that

womanhood is not defined by comparison but by an internalized cultural strength that actively resists subjugation.

Angelou further invokes traditional and natural imagery to embody defiance against historical oppression in “Still I Rise.” The speaker aligns her spirit not with dust or dirt (where her oppressors have trodden her) but with massive, natural forces that are eternal and uncontrollable. This cosmological reference situates her resistance within a universal, unstoppable cycle:

> 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 (7-8).

The metaphors of "moons," "suns," and "tides" signify the cyclical certainty of her ultimate triumph, rooting her freedom not in temporary political victory but in the natural

laws of the universe. This culminates in the powerful, historically resonant imagery of the “black ocean,” which signifies both the trauma of the Middle Passage and the uncontainable spirit of African descendants rising from that pain: "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, / Welling and swelling I bear in the tide" (Angelou). Oceanic imagery situates her voice within a collective history of survival, turning a memory of anguish into a prophecy of resistance.

Angelou’s “Our Grandmothers” explicitly reaches into ancestral memory, evoking the African matriarch as the source of cultural survival. The poem rejects the notion of the enslaved woman as merely "property" and instead establishes her as a pillar of endurance and spiritual strength. The speaker draws on the archetype of the enduring grandmother, who is both Sojourner and Sheba, linking the contemporary struggle to a proud, deep history:

> She is Sheba and Sojourner,
>
> Harriet and Zora,
>
> Mary Bethune and Angela,
>
> Annie to Zenobia.
>
> She stands
>
> before the abortion clinic,
>
> confounded by the lack of choices.
>
> In the Welfare line,
>
> reduced to the pity of handouts

Ordained in the pulpit, shielded by the mysteries,

In the operating room,

husbanding life (20-21).

This passage affirms that the African feminine spirit is a continuous, living force, whose influence spans from biblical queens (Sheba) to historical activists (Harriet, Angela), ensuring the transmission of cultural strength to future generations.

Similarly, Ifi Amadiume's poetry reasserts African culture through direct engagement with contemporary and historical imagery. Her poem "We Have Even Lost Our Tongues!" details the tragic cultural dispossession brought by neo colonial powers, specifically through the economic destruction of local, traditional food systems. The poem employs specific African food references—"akara balls," "moi moi," "red oil"—as symbols of a vibrant, pre-dispossession life. The lament is cultural as much as economic:

There was a time

where for pennies

we filled our bellies;

akara balls,

moi moi,

rolling smoothly

from leaves

fresh and boiled

beans,

steaming hot,

cooked in spice

and red oil,

fermented maize,

millet,

for porridge.

We broke the night's fast

for pennies! (83).

By using the names of these traditional foods, Amadiume resists the imposed monoculture of Westernization and elevates the memory of indigenous sustenance as a form of cultural wealth. The loss of these resources, alongside the loss of "tongues," underscores the systemic nature of cultural erasure, yet the memory itself becomes the impetus for resistance.

Amadiume's "Creation" further reclaims cosmological traditions by centering African myth at the origin of human experience. The poem uses the powerful, natural imagery of the orange and its seed to redefine a woman's physical and reproductive self outside the context of male control or consumption. The core argument is a reclaiming of self that links the feminine body to the origin of life:

I was left naked and unshielded by a boy.

It was not the nakedness of the naked;

it was the nakedness of the naked earth:

it was the nakedness of birth;

it was the nakedness of creation.

My seed took root again,

my shield in time regained,

full of sweet juice

again to be sucked (86-87).

This imagery restores dignity to African feminine cosmology, countering narratives that attempt to dismiss or dominate indigenous origins. By celebrating the regenerative power of the body, Amadiume elevates cultural self-memory as a crucial component of resistance.

2.2 Language of Pride and Spirituality in Anti-Colonial Expression

The works of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume demonstrate how language infused with pride and spirituality becomes a potent weapon against colonial narratives that sought to degrade African identity. Both poets use affirmations of dignity, the rhythm of faith, and imagery of transcendence to challenge the dehumanization imposed by slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy. Their poetry transforms words into a spiritual armor, affirming African humanity and resilience.

In “Still I Rise,” Angelou declares survival as an act of defiance, blending personal pride with a powerful spiritual cadence that echoes both biblical prophecy and African oral tradition. The poem directly addresses the oppressor, transforming historical pain into a defiant assertion of future triumph. The repetition of “I rise” functions as a chant of resurrection, directly opposing narratives of subjugation. This spiritual affirmation is made clear in the final stanzas where the speaker transcends historical bondage:

> 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 (9).

The final repetition of “I rise” is not just an individual statement of strength but a collective, spiritual elevation—a declaration that African American identity embodies the fulfilled promise and hope of the ancestors.

Angelou’s spiritual language is even more evident in “Our Grandmothers,” where she invokes divine strength and unyielding faith to highlight the endurance of enslaved African ancestors. The grandmother figure’s perseverance is rooted in a deep, personal spirituality that defies the physical realities of her bondage and the cultural violence of the colonizers. This faith represents a sustaining force that counters despair and dehumanization. She stands as a solitary, sacred figure, claiming her inherent dignity:

> Into the crashing sound,
>
> Into wickedness, she cried,
>
> No one, no, nor no one million ones dare deny me God. I go forth alone, and stand as ten thousand.
>
> The Divine upon my right impels me to pull forever at the latch on freedom’s gate.
>
> The Holy Spirit upon my left leads my feet without ceasing into the camp of the righteous and into the tents of the free (19-20).

Faith here is not a passive abstraction but an active, militant force—a spiritual call to action that positions the African matriarch at the vanguard of the fight for freedom.

In “Phenomenal Woman,” Angelou’s language elevates pride into a spiritual affirmation of the body itself. The rhythmic structure and confident tone create a cadence of self worship, transforming features once denigrated under racist and patriarchal eyes into sources of divine power. The poem concludes with a powerful, comprehensive self definition that embodies this spiritual worth:

> Now you understand
>
> Just why my head’s not bowed.
>
> I don’t shout or jump about
>
> Or have to talk real loud.
>
> When you see me passing,
>
> It ought to make you proud.
>
> I say,
>
> It’s in the click of my heels,
>
> The bend of my hair,
>
> the palm of my hand,
>
> The need for my care.
>
> ’Cause I’m a woman
>
> Phenomenally.
>
> Phenomenal woman,

That's me (5-6).

The final phrase, "That's me," is an undisputed assertion of self, turning the act of simply being an African woman into a phenomenal, spiritual celebration.

Similarly, Ifi Amadiume's poetry centers spiritual autonomy, rooting pride in indigenous traditions as a counter to colonial imposition. In "Mistress of my own being," the speaker achieves a state of supreme, internal sovereignty. This contentment is framed as a sacred, personal space, a sweet sanctuary where external needs and control—especially those imposed by colonial or patriarchal systems—are irrelevant:

United of all binding knots_
the tears and ties of time,
freed of haunting memories and regrets,
feelings of contentment rush on like soft tidal waves,
till slowly they envelop me.
Thinking of nothing,
wrapped up in my own warmth,
in scents and steam-blankets,
protected in my contentment,
I lie calm and supreme
In this sweet sanctuary,
I have no need of food or man,

I feel no need for tomorrows,

no need for sound or voices,

only the soothing silence of the night (81).

This supreme calm acts as a direct resistance to colonial systems that thrive on dependency, fear, and psychological disruption. The speaker is the "Mistress of my own being," rejecting external validation and positioning African spiritual sovereignty as the true source of personal liberation.

Amadiume's "We Have Even Lost Our Tongues!" portrays the spiritual consequences of colonial dispossession—the loss of cultural language and the silencing of indigenous voices—yet the poem's powerful, despairing tone itself affirms the persistence of African pride and spirit. The final lines of the poem, describing the cultural consequence of corruption, are a spiritual and political lament that affirms the dignity of the suffering people:

The soldiers have come,

still we have nothing,

nothing, nothing.

Now we have even

lost our tongues,

cut off

by the sharp edges

of khakis

stiffened with the juice

of our grains

our tubers.

Look,

O heartless dictators,

people are dying, dying,

dying of hunger,

dying of thirst! (85-86).

This final, desperate cry for the dying people functions as a spiritual challenge to the "heartless dictators," asserting the moral and human worth of those who have been stripped of everything, including their language of faith and pride.

Together, Angelou and Amadiume reveal that poetry infused with pride and spirituality transforms language into resistance. Angelou draws upon rhythm, faith, and affirmation to raise African American identity from the ashes of oppression, while Amadiume restores the self and indigenous symbols as sources of African dignity. Both show that spirituality is not merely private faith but a communal weapon of survival and defiance—a declaration that African humanhood is sacred, enduring, and undefeatable.

2.3 Affirmation of Ancestral Connection in the Face of Colonial Erasure

A central element in the poetics of African humanhood is the reaffirmation of ancestral presence as a living force. Colonialism and slavery attempted to sever African people from their history, culture, and lineage, but the poetry of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume restores this broken chain, emphasizing continuity, memory, and belonging. Their works present ancestral voices not as relics of the past but as companions in the present struggle for dignity.

Angelou's "Our Grandmothers" stands as a powerful, direct affirmation of ancestral presence. The grandmother figure embodies the voice of survival and resistance, transmitting an inherited, unbreakable strength. The poem details the matriarch's endurance through unimaginable brutality, capturing the essence of her physical and spiritual struggle against colonial violence. The grandmother becomes both memory and prophecy, a vessel through which future generations inherit the spirit of endurance:

> She lay, skin down on the moist dirt,
>
> the canebrake rustling
>
> with the whispers of leaves, and loud longing of hounds and the rack of hunters crackling the bear branches.
>
> She muttered, lifting her head a nod toward freedom,
>
> I shall not, I shall not be moved .
>
> She gathered her babies
>
> their tears slick as oil on black faces,

their young eyes canvassing mornings of madness (15).

By focusing on this ancestral struggle as an inheritance, Angelou ensures that the foundation of African identity cannot be erased, regardless of the brutality of the system. The phrase “I shall not be moved” becomes a sacred refrain of inherited resistance.

In “Still I Rise,” Angelou ties her personal triumph to a collective ancestral lineage, suggesting that her rise is not hers alone but a resurgence of a buried African spirit. The poet merges her personal identity with the vast, communal ancestral legacy. This connection asserts that the enslaved ancestors, though denied dignity in their lifetimes, continue to live and achieve freedom through her present success. The culmination of her defiance is framed as a fulfillment of historical promise:

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 (9).

The “gifts that my ancestors gave” symbolize strength, resilience, and cultural memory passed down through generations, serving as a direct and powerful rejection of colonial erasure.

Similarly, Ifi Amadiume’s poetry grounds its affirmation of self and community in ancestral bonds. In “Be Brothers,” Amadiume emphasizes communal ancestry as the root of present solidarity. The poem is framed as a covenant where the sharing of a “garment” symbolizes the traditional African principle of kinship and mutual protection inherited from their forebears. The call for brotherhood is an invocation of an older, stronger moral code:

This garment I give you,

let it shield your body,

in return, please shield my baby.

Just as this garment hides your nakedness, please hide his nakedness and weakness.

This garment I give you;

sewn with tender care,

In return please take care of my baby.

Just as each stitch is sewn with tenderness ,

please soothe his sadness and tender tears.

This garment I give you,

one for him, one for you,

in return, please be brothers with my baby. (Amadiume).

The “tender care” and the call to “be brothers” reflect a pre-colonial relational ethic rooted in familial and communal ancestry, asserting that African unity and kinship precede and will outlast colonial intrusion. The ancestral bond is affirmed as eternal, rooted in spiritual and familial connections that no foreign power can dissolve.

In “Creation,” Amadiume reclaims ancestral cosmological memory by presenting the woman’s regenerative power as an unbreakable, natural force. After being temporarily depleted, the speaker finds her strength renewed in a process that mirrors the ancient, cyclical power of the earth. This self reclamation connects her to a primal, ancestral past:

I was left naked and unshielded by a boy.

It was not the nakedness of the naked;

it was the nakedness of the naked earth:

it was the nakedness of birth;

it was the nakedness of creation.

My seed took root again,

my shield in time regained,

full of sweet juice

again to be sucked (86-87).

This cyclical imagery implies a form of ancestral wisdom that enables the speaker to recover and thrive, positioning her body and spirit within an indigenous, self sustaining cycle of life that rejects dependence on the colonizing "boy."

Through these affirmations, both poets highlight that African humanhood cannot be detached from its ancestral core. Angelou draws upon the memory of African American survival, while Amadiume invokes spiritual and communal ties. Together, they restore the ancestral voice as an ever present force, ensuring that the African spirit lives beyond the violence of colonial erasure.

This chapter established that the poetics of defiance in Angelou's and Amadiume's work is a direct response to colonial systems. The poets achieve this by centering African humanhood through three integrated strategies: first, by reclaiming identity through Cultural Imagery and Traditional References, affirming the body and heritage as sites of resistance. Second, they deploy Language of Pride and Spirituality, transforming diction and rhythm into a declaration of self-sovereignty. Finally, they solidify this resistance through the Affirmation of Ancestral Connection, thereby restoring an unbreakable chain of lineage. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates that poetic defiance is an active tool, embedding the African spirit and memory into the very language of the text to ensure the enduring vitality of the human soul against historical erasure.

CHAPTER THREE

CELEBRATING AFRICAN HUMANHOOD THROUGH REJECTING HEGEMONIC NORMS

The celebration of African humanhood in Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume's poetry cannot be separated from their resistance to hegemonic norms. Both poets confront the systems of colonialism, patriarchy, and Eurocentric values that seek to define and confine African identity. By refusing Western ideals of gender, beauty, and cultural belonging, their poetry reclaims African selfhood as complete and dignified on its own terms. In this chapter, attention will be given to how the poets challenge hegemonic structures, assert African-centred identity, and reject the stereotypes and expectations that deny African people their humanity.

3.1 Challenging Hegemonic Norms and Reclaiming African Identity

Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume transform poetry into a powerful tool of resistance by directly confronting the hegemonic forces of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. Their works expose the distortions of domination while offering counter-narratives that center African dignity and strength. The poets do not simply reject oppression; they boldly reimagine identity through pride, survival, and autonomy.

Angelou's "Still I Rise" epitomizes this resistance to historical and racist hegemony. The speaker confronts the erasure and distortion of Black history with unyielding defiance, directly challenging the oppressor who seeks to diminish her through fabricated

narratives. Angelou undermines these lies by proclaiming her inevitable capacity to rise, not through submission, but through a spiritual and collective will:

> 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 (7).

The simile "like dust, I'll rise" suggests the inevitability of reclamation; dust cannot be suppressed forever, and the resilience of the Black subject is equally unstoppable. Her strength is presented as an internal, unstoppable wealth ("oil wells," "gold mines"), symbolic of a collective reclaiming of voice and place in history outside of the colonizer's validation.

Angelou equally dismantles hegemonic ideals of beauty that privilege Eurocentric features. In “Phenomenal Woman,” she asserts her confidence in her natural body, challenging the colonial legacy of diminishing Black womanhood. Her definition of beauty is entirely intrinsic, based on the magnetic appeal of her authentic self:

> Men themselves have wondered
> What they see in me.
> They try so much
> But they can’t touch
> My inner mystery.
> When I try to show them,
> They say they still can’t see.
> I say,
> It’s in the arch of my back,
> The sun of my smile,
> The ride of my breasts,
> The grace of my style (4-5).

Rather than submitting to external standards, the speaker redefines beauty as inherent to her African body, celebrating each feature—her arch, her smile, her style—as a source of unshakeable power. By affirming herself “phenomenally,” she directly challenges

hegemonic systems that seek to diminish Black womanhood through visual and social standards.

Amadiume, in “We Have Even Lost Our Tongues!,” presents the harsh reality of cultural and political disempowerment under colonial and military dominance. The poem challenges the hegemonic norm of enforced silence, lamenting the loss of indigenous life and language. The core of the critique lies in the violent suppression of indigenous expression:

> Look,
> O heartless rulers,
> look at our wretched people today.
> We went to the polls,
> we won no respect,
> we were losing, losing,
> losing everything,
> but our mouths.
> We could curse them,
> we could curse the land,
> we could curse the day
> they found oil in her (84-85).

This section highlights the political deception that underlies the imposition of new governance. Furthermore, the poem details the literal and symbolic stripping away of cultural markers, ultimately leaving the people speechless, as their "tongues, / cut off / by the sharp edges / of khakis" (Amadiume). Yet, by voicing this devastating lament and naming the oppressors as "heartless rulers," Amadiume paradoxically reclaims what was taken—she makes silence speak. This becomes an essential act of cultural defiance, preserving the memory of what was lost.

Amadiume echoes this reclaiming of identity in "Mistress of My Own Being," where she asserts complete autonomy and self-definition outside of patriarchal and societal structures. The speaker establishes an internal sanctuary where external validation—both economic and relational—is made redundant:

> In this sweet sanctuary,
> I have no need of food or man,
> I feel no need for tomorrows,
> no need for sound or voices,
> only the soothing silence of the night.
> Through the dancing folds
> of the lacy petticoat of the window,
> I see the yellowness of the night;
> a huge brilliant eye in heaven
> probing me (81)

Here, liberation is found in self-sufficiency and spiritual calm. By declaring "I have no need of food or man," Amadiume confronts patriarchal norms that equate womanhood with dependence. Instead, she presents an image of African womanhood that is sovereign, serene, and dignified, defined entirely on its own terms.

Both poets, then, challenge hegemonic norms not only by naming oppression but also by redefining the terms of African identity. Angelou rises against racist erasure, while Amadiume speaks against the enforced silencing of her people and the imposition of dependence. Together, they transform poetry into an insistence that African humanhood is whole, dignified, and eternally resistant to external control.

3.2 Assertion of African-Centered Identity and Redefinition of Self

Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume place women at the center of resistance, using poetry to dismantle structures of patriarchy and celebrate female strength. Both writers envision women not as passive victims but as active agents who embody resilience, defiance, and self-assertion in societies where gender norms attempt to constrain them.

Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" directly resists narrow, hegemonic definitions of femininity. She challenges a society that prizes slimness, daintiness, and Eurocentric beauty ideals, presenting instead a Black woman whose power flows from her body, confidence, and spirit. The speaker refuses to allow men's confusion to dictate her worth, turning their failure to comprehend her power into a celebration of her "inner mystery":

Here, Angelou defines femininity as self-possessed and unapologetic. She refuses the external gaze, redefining the female body as a site of empowerment rather than objectification, thereby centering African American womanhood as the true measure of beauty and grace.

Amadiume echoes this theme of female agency and African centered identity in “Mistress of My Own Being.” Unlike patriarchal narratives that define women by their relation to men or family, Amadiume asserts the complete sufficiency and autonomy of the female self. Her contentment is achieved by rejecting external societal demands, including those related to traditional dependency:

> United of all binding knots_
> the tears and ties of time,
> freed of haunting memories and regrets,
> feelings of contentment rush on like soft tidal waves,
> till slowly they envelop me.
> Thinking of nothing,
> wrapped up in my own warmth,
> in scents and steam-blankets,
> protected in my contentment,
> I lie calm and supreme
> In this sweet sanctuary,
> I have no need of food or man (81).

By declaring “I have no need of food or man,” Amadiume reclaims womanhood as autonomous and spiritually complete. The poem becomes an anthem of freedom—a declaration that female identity need not be bound to submission, marriage, or patriarchal definitions, but is instead sovereign, serene, and dignified.

Angelou’s “Our Grandmothers” broadens this vision by situating female resistance within the historical crucible of slavery. The poem honors enslaved women who endured unimaginable brutality yet refused to break, establishing the African matriarch as an archetype of historical female agency. Though beaten and pursued, she insists on her humanity and transmits a spirit of defiance:

> She lay, skin down on the moist dirt,
>
> the canebrake rustling
>
> with the whispers of leaves, and loud longing of hounds and the rack of hunters crackling the bear branches.
>
> She muttered, lifting her head a nod toward freedom,
>
> I shall not, I shall not be moved .
>
> She gathered her babies
>
> their tears slick as oil on black faces,
>
> their young eyes canvassing mornings of madness (15).

The enduring refusal to be moved connects contemporary struggles for female agency to a long lineage of ancestral resistance, affirming that the Black woman's spirit is inherently unyielding.

Amadiume offers a more visceral critique of patriarchal violence in "Bloody Masculinity," exposing how traditional and modern gender systems attempt to constrain and diminish female experience. The speaker directly challenges the expectations and traumas associated with the male gaze and the violence of male sexuality:

> Shall I be child of the full moon,
> a slave to love
> in seasoned womanhood?
> Shall I dare worship yet again
> starry-eyed in the temple of love
> with madness yet unbroken?
> Shall I shed tears of blood
> again in loving
> while virgins bleed freely,
> new initiates in love?
> Will the source of my spring
> again recede
> at blast of the unbending penis? (82).

The rhetorical questions and the raw imagery of bleeding and receding "spring" illustrate the violence of patriarchal constraints on female emotional and physical life. The defiance lies in the act of voicing this pain and questioning the very nature of this "bloody masculinity," transforming the experience of degradation into an active critique and a refusal of silent compliance.

Together, Angelou and Amadiume construct a radical redefinition of gender. Angelou affirms the beauty, power, and history of Black womanhood, while Amadiume exposes the violence of patriarchy and asserts the complete autonomy of women's voices. Their works resist the erasure of women from history and demand recognition of women as whole, capable, and sovereign beings, central to the African identity.

3.3 Rejection of Western Beauty Ideals and Gender Expectations

In celebrating African humanhood, both Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume reject the restrictive frameworks imposed by Western ideals of beauty and gender roles. Their poetry becomes a deliberate effort to dismantle narratives that undermine African identity and to promote alternative values rooted in cultural pride and self-definition.

Amadiume's "Nok Lady in Terracotta" provides a crucial starting point for this rejection by affirming an African aesthetic and historical continuity that precedes Western contact. The persona engages with the ancient sculpture to expose the long history of external violence while reaffirming the inherent value of the African form and heritage. The poem directly names the perpetrators—Persians, Romans, French, English—and contrasts their destructive history with the enduring memory preserved by the Nok figure:

Mother!

you were thus left neglected,

those sons left you unprotected,

then the rape began:

persecuting Persians!

merciless Macedonians!

ruling Romans!

ruthless Arabs!

touring Turks!

treacherous French!

leech like English!

You see sister,

the beginning of our anguish (72).

By invoking this ancient figure and the collective memory of historical violation, Amadiume rejects the Western narrative that defines African history as beginning with conquest. The poem insists that true identity resides in looking into the eyes of the "Nok lady in terracotta," prioritizing indigenous, pre-colonial aesthetic and historical wisdom over foreign perspectives.

Amadiume's "Be Brothers" strongly challenges the Western-influenced patriarchal hierarchy that often pits men and women against each other. The poem resists gender

opposition by urging kinship and solidarity grounded in cooperation. The act of the woman offering a garment to protect a baby symbolizes a traditional, shared humanity and responsibility that transcends the rigid gender roles often promoted by hegemonic Western frameworks:

> This garment I give you,
>
> let it shield your body,
>
> in return, please shield my baby .
>
> Just as this garment hides your nakedness, please hide his nakedness and weakness.
>
> This garment I give you;
>
> sewn with tender care,
>
> In return please take care of my baby.
>
> Just as each stitch is sewn with tenderness ,
>
> please soothe his sadness and tender tears.
>
> This garment I give you,
>
> one for him, one for you,
>
> in return, please be brothers with my baby (87).

This appeal to communal and familial responsibility redefines African gender relations outside the Western categories of dominance and submission, advocating instead for a shared, cooperative bond.

Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" offers a transatlantic complement to this stance by explicitly rejecting Eurocentric beauty standards that idolize slimness, fragility, and submissiveness. The speaker asserts the power of her natural body and unshakeable presence. She reframes what is "phenomenal," grounding beauty in confidence, heritage, and strength rather than imposed standards:

> Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
>
> I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
>
> But when I start to tell them,
>
> They think I'm telling lies.
>
> I say,
>
> It's in the reach of my arms,
>
> The span of my hips,
>
> The stride of my step,
>
> The curl of my lips.
>
> I'm a woman
>
> Phenomenally.
>
> Phenomenal woman,
>
> That's me (3).

The celebration of her physical form and movement here directly confronts Western ideals that have historically denied the beauty of African women. Angelou defines worth as intrinsic and self-affirmed, rather than something bestowed by a magazine cover or a colonial gaze.

Furthermore, in “Weekend Glory,” Angelou resists Western capitalist ideals that equate a woman’s worth with wealth, materialism, or patriarchal validation. She celebrates joy in simplicity and self-pride, dismantling the need for the external status symbols that define success in Western consumer culture:

> If they want to learn how to live life right
> they ought to study me on Saturday night.
> My job at the plant
> ain't the biggest bet,
> but I pay my bills
> and stay out of debt.
> I get my hair done
> for my own self's sake,
> so I don't have to pick
> and I don't have to rake.
> Take the church money out
> and head cross town (12).

By rejecting the societal pressures of accumulation and status, Angelou dismisses Western consumer driven femininity. She instead defines dignity through contentment, self-respect, and independence, prioritizing the joy of African humanhood over material status.

Together, these poems dismantle Western constructs of both gender and beauty. Amadiume challenges patriarchal divisions and affirms African models of gender complementarity and historical self-definition, while Angelou reclaims the African woman's body and lifestyle as definitive sites of beauty and power. Both poets insist that African humanhood must arise from self-affirmation and cultural wholeness, entirely independent of foreign standards.

Chapter Three demonstrated that celebrating African humanhood requires the Rejection of Hegemonic Norms, achieved through a concerted poetic dismantling of external power structures. This rejection began by Challenging Hegemonic Norms and Reclaiming African Identity, where Angelou asserted her unsuppressible dignity in "Still I Rise" against racist narratives, and Amadiume countered political suppression in "We Have Even Lost Our Tongues!" The chapter further established the Assertion of African-Centered Identity and Redefinition of Self, with both poets centering female agency: Angelou celebrated Black womanhood as "Phenomenal," and Amadiume proclaimed spiritual autonomy in "Mistress of my own being." Finally, both poets achieved definitive rejection through the Rejection of Western Beauty Ideals and Gender Expectations, with Angelou prioritizing personal joy over capitalist status in "Weekend Glory," and

Amadiume using the “Nok Lady in Terracotta” to affirm an enduring, indigenous aesthetic that precedes and outlasts all colonial definitions. Ultimately, the poetry insists that African dignity is sovereign and must be defined solely from within its own historical and cultural context.

CHAPTER FOUR

CELEBRATING AFRICAN HUMANHOOD THROUGH EMPOWERING VOICE AND TONE

In addition to resisting oppression and rejecting imposed norms, Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume celebrate African humanhood by giving voice to empowerment. Their poetry thrives on rhythm, tone, and repetition, which become instruments of affirmation and restoration. Through confident language, uplifting imagery, and powerful cadence, both poets reconstruct African dignity and proclaim wholeness. This chapter examines how their poetic voices redefine beauty and strength, restore psychological and emotional balance, and assert human worth through language that resonates with resilience and pride.

4.1 Redefining Beauty, Strength, and Worth through Poetic Language

The redefinition of beauty, strength, and worth in the poetry of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume serves as one of the central strategies for celebrating African humanhood. Both poets dismantle colonial and patriarchal constructs by creating a powerful new poetic language of affirmation and self definition.

Maya Angelou, in “Phenomenal Woman,” directly overturns the dominant Western conception of beauty, which privileges thinness, fragility, and Eurocentric features. She asserts her beauty unapologetically by contrasting herself with the accepted standard and declaring the source of her power:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size

But when I start to tell them,

They think I’m telling lies.

I say,

It’s in the reach of my arms,

The span of my hips,

The stride of my step,

The curl of my lips.

I’m a woman

Phenomenally (3).

Angelou presents a radical counter-claim: beauty does not reside in conformity to narrow ideals but in confidence, vitality, and the unique physical features of the Black female body. By situating beauty in ordinary movements and natural features ("the fire in my eyes," "the swing in my waist"), Angelou elevates traits often dismissed by dominant culture. The repeated declaration—“Phenomenal woman, / That’s me”—becomes a mantra of empowerment, redefining self-worth through unshakeable affirmation.

In “Still I Rise,” Angelou broadens this redefinition beyond physical appearance to encompass resilience and inner power. She uses poetic language, especially rhetorical

questions and cosmic imagery, to challenge systems of oppression and assert a boundless African worth rooted in historical survival and spiritual defiance:

> 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? (7-8).

Here, strength is articulated as an irrepressible quality, rooted in ancestral survival. The imagery of rising "like dust," "like moons and like suns," and finally as a "black ocean, leaping and wide" reshapes African worth as cosmic, eternal, and boundless. Angelou uses a defiant cadence to expand the Black identity into universal significance, asserting dignity not through conformity but through ancestral resilience and spiritual grandeur.

Ifi Amadiume similarly engages in redefining worth through self possession and autonomy. In "Mistress of My Own Being," she articulates a vision of female selfhood

free from dependency on patriarchal norms. The speaker finds fulfillment in her internal state, contrasting her peace with external expectations:

> United of all binding knots_
>
> the tears and ties of time,
>
> freed of haunting memories and regrets,
>
> feelings of contentment rush on like soft tidal waves,
>
> till slowly they envelop me.
>
> Thinking of nothing,
>
> wrapped up in my own warmth,
>
> in scents and steam-blankets,
>
> protected in my contentment,
>
> I lie calm and supreme
>
> In this sweet sanctuary,
>
> I have no need of food or man (81).

The deliberate rejection of the "need of food or man" destabilizes patriarchal definitions of women as incomplete without male validation. Instead, Amadiume envisions wholeness within solitude, framing worth in terms of personal peace and self-contentment. The woman becomes "calm and supreme," master of her own identity rather than a vessel for external validation.

In “Creation,” Amadiume continues this theme by reimagining female creativity and regeneration. Even after the experience of exploitation by the “boy,” the speaker finds restoration and renewal through her intrinsic, cyclical power. The poetic language reframes the experience from victimization to one of regenerative strength:

> Like the seed of an orange spat out by a boy,
> you have left all the goodness still in me,
> still like a boy,
> you have left my seed to crop.
> I was left naked and unshielded by a boy.
> It was not the nakedness of the naked;
> it was the nakedness of the naked earth:
> it was the nakedness of birth:
> it was the nakedness of creation.
> My seed took root again (86).

Through the metaphor of the orange seed, Amadiume portrays female worth as regenerative and inexhaustible. Exploitation cannot exhaust the essence of womanhood; instead, she reclaims vitality through resilient, self-determined biological and spiritual processes.

Angelou also redefines worth through the celebration of ordinary working class life in “Weekend Glory.” Rejecting materialism and elite ideals of success, she affirms dignity

in self-reliance and communal joy. She contrasts her life with those seeking artificial status ("posin' and preenin' / and puttin' on acts"):

> My job at the plant
> ain't the biggest bet,
> but I pay my bills
> and stay out of debt.
> I get my hair done
> for my own self's sake,
> so I don't have to pick
> and I don't have to rake.
> Take the church money out
> and head cross town
> to my friend girl's house
> where we plan our round (12).

Angelou refuses to measure worth by wealth or status, instead embracing joy, self care, and cultural vibrancy. Her final affirmation of being “Black / on a Saturday night” insists that beauty and worth are located not in perfection but in the celebration of resilience, survival, and joy within a self defined, communal context.

Together, Angelou and Amadiume’s works redefine beauty, strength, and worth through poetic language that resists hegemonic standards. Angelou focuses on affirming Black

female presence as phenomenal and cosmically resilient, while Amadiume reclaims self possession, regeneration, and everyday dignity as fundamental markers of African human value.

4.2 Psychological and Emotional Restoration through Affirmative Expression

Affirmative expression in the works of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume functions as a potent form of psychological and emotional restoration, enabling African voices—particularly women's voices—to rise above histories of oppression. Their poetry not only asserts survival but transforms trauma into healing affirmations that restore dignity and selfhood.

Angelou offers one of the most powerful poetic testaments to restoration in "Still I Rise." The poem's repeated refrain—"I rise"—works like a therapeutic mantra, countering the weight of historical violence with a persistent affirmation of resilience. The speaker actively dismantles attempts to diminish her worth, transforming threats into declarations of transcendence:

> 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.
>
> Out of the huts of history's shame
>
> I rise
>
> Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise (8-9).

The imagery of rising "like air" suggests transcendence, a movement beyond the psychological scars of racism and sexism. The repetition acts as an incantation, transforming pain into a healing ritual. The affirmation does not deny the wounds of oppression but insists on the speaker's ability to transcend them, turning the language of resistance into profound psychological restoration.

Similarly, in "Our Grandmothers," Angelou situates restoration within the collective, defiant memory of enslaved women. The grandmother figure, faced with relentless, systematic dehumanisation, repeats a powerful declaration that functions as both a spiritual and psychological anchor against erasure:

She said, But my description cannot fit your tongue, for

I have a certain way of being in this world,

and I shall not, I shall not be moved.

...

However I am perceived and deceived,

however my ignorance and conceits,

lay aside your fears that I will be undone.

For I shall not be moved (18,21,22).

Faced with dehumanisation, this definitive assertion transforms insult into an affirmation, restoring dignity through an unwavering faith in selfhood that refuses to be defined by the language of oppressors.

Ifi Amadiume also highlights emotional healing by centering women's autonomy and inner calm. In "Mistress of My Own Being," the speaker finds essential solace and restoration in solitude, achieving a deliberate state of self-possession:

> United of all binding knots—
>
> the tears and ties of time,
>
> freed of haunting memories and regrets,
>
> feelings of contentment rush on like soft tidal waves,
>
> till slowly they envelop me.
>
> ...
>
> I lie calm and supreme,
>
> Mistress of my own being (81-82).

This scene of serenity counters the external pressures of a patriarchal or traumatizing society. Emotional healing here comes not through external validation but through a deliberate detachment from societal expectations and a return to personal contentment, making her the "Mistress of [her] own being."

Amadiume also explores emotional healing as an inherent process of regeneration following exploitation in "Creation." Even after depletion, where she is consumed "Like a sweet orange sucked by a boy," the speaker insists on an inevitable recovery and renewal:

> Like the seed of an orange spat out by a boy,
>
> you have left all the goodness still in me,
>
> still like a boy,
>
> you have left my seed to crop.
>
> ...
>
> My seed took root again,
>
> my shield in time regained,
>
> full of sweet juice
>
> again to be sucked (86-87).

The regenerative metaphor positions the African woman as perpetually restorative. Her capacity for renewal is undiminished by trauma, as the act of re-rooting symbolises an emotional restoration that transcends violation, affirming her indestructible, core essence. Finally, Angelou's "Weekend Glory" contributes to psychological restoration by celebrating joy amidst economic hardship. The speaker reframes modest survival as a powerful source of pride, satisfaction, and renewal:

> My job at the plant
>
> ain't the biggest bet,

but I pay my bills

and stay out of debt.

I get my hair done

for my own self's sake,

so I don't have to pick

and I don't have to rake.

...

And turn away from worry

with sassy glance (12-13).

Instead of despairing, the poem restores joy to daily existence by affirming modest victories ("pay my bills") and the simple act of self-care. This turns ordinary moments into sites of affirmation and psychological renewal, proving that joy is a constant, accessible act of resistance.

4.3 Human Dignity and Wholeness through Voice, Rhythm, and Repetition

Voice, rhythm, and repetition in the poetry of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume function as stylistic devices that restore human dignity and reconstitute wholeness for African peoples, particularly women. These techniques not only give aesthetic power to their poetry but also serve as cultural affirmations, grounding individual identity in collective rhythm and communal healing.

Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" epitomises the reclamation of dignity through a confident, rhythmic voice. The speaker asserts her worth not through conforming to conventional beauty standards but through self-affirmation, using repetition to cement her identity. The confident voice rejects societal impositions, replacing them with a rhythm of self-possession and pride. This affirmation is reinforced through the final stanza's rhythmic assertion of her intrinsic value:

> I say,
>
> It's in the arch of my back,
>
> The sun of my smile,
>
> The ride of my breasts,
>
> The grace of my style.
>
> I'm a woman
>
> Phenomenally.
>
> Phenomenal woman,
>
> That's me (5).

The repetition of "Phenomenal woman" becomes a rhythmic refrain that affirms wholeness. It transforms the individual voice into a universal declaration, extending dignity not only to the speaker but to Black womanhood collectively. Through voice and rhythm, the poem creates a ritual of recognition, asserting wholeness where society seeks fragmentation.

Similarly, Angelou's "Still I Rise" embodies rhythm as a tool of dignity. The insistent refrain—"I rise"—creates a drumbeat of resistance, echoing African oral traditions where repetition is both mnemonic and affirmational. The final stanza uses this cadence to mimic the physical act of rising, embodying resilience in the very rhythm of the poem:

> 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 (9).

The ritual repetition restores dignity by transforming survival into triumph, insisting upon the speaker's wholeness despite historical fragmentation. The rhythm aligns the individual struggle with powerful, natural forces like the "black ocean," underscoring an innate, irrepressible dignity.

Ifi Amadiume employs repetition and rhythm not only for affirmation but also for lamentation that, paradoxically, restores dignity by refusing silence. In "We Have Even Lost Our Tongues!," the repeated exclamatory phrase "Look," establishes a demanding, insistent rhythm of witness, confronting those responsible for the people's suffering:

Look,

O heartless ones,

look at our dying people.

...

Look,

O heartless ones,

look at our dying people today.

...

Look,

O heartless dictators,

people are dying, dying,

dying of hunger, (83,84,86).

The triple repetition of "dying" and the insistent rhythm of the command "Look" transform the speaker's voice from a passive victim's sigh into an authoritative moral indictment. The act of giving voice to the collective pain, using rhythm as a framework for truth, restores human dignity to the "wretched people" who were otherwise reduced to "tight-lipped distant spectators."

Furthermore, in "Creation," Amadiume uses a cyclical rhythm to assert wholeness that transcends violation. The poem’s rhythm is layered with regenerative imagery,

emphasizing destruction followed by an inevitable restoration that mirrors the rhythm of nature:

> Like the seed of an orange spat out by a boy,
>
> you have left all the goodness still in me,
>
> still like a boy,
>
> you have left my seed to crop.
>
> ...
>
> My seed took root again,
>
> my shield in time regained,
>
> full of sweet juice (86-87).

The repetition of "again" produces a rhythmic assertion of renewal, positioning the speaker as perpetually whole, regardless of previous violation. Rhythm here enacts continuity, underscoring the inherent dignity of African womanhood which is fundamentally tied to an unstoppable, life-giving essence.

Both poets thus utilise voice, rhythm, and repetition as instruments of reclamation. Angelou's bold refrains and conversational rhythms democratise dignity, extending it across communal lines, while Amadiume's regenerative cycles and calm cadences locate wholeness in autonomy and continuity. In both, repetition is not redundancy but ritual, ultimately restoring humanhood by embedding affirmation in the very structure of the poem.

Chapter Four has demonstrated that celebrating African humanhood relies fundamentally on the strategic deployment of poetic voice and tone, which function to achieve both psychological restoration and the affirmation of human dignity and wholeness. Through empowering expression, Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume transform historical trauma into sources of strength. Angelou's bold use of repetition in refrains like "I rise" and "Phenomenal woman" establishes a rhythm of self-possession that heals psychological wounds and challenges external definitions of worth, while her conversational cadence in "Weekend Glory" dignifies the ordinary lived experiences of Black women. Similarly, Amadiume employs rhythmic assertions of regeneration in "Creation" to establish intrinsic wholeness despite violation, and uses an uncompromisingly defiant voice in poems like "We Have Even Lost Our Tongues!" to restore dignity by forcefully bearing witness to collective suffering. Ultimately, in both poets, the affirmative voice is a powerful therapeutic instrument that reclaims control over the self and embeds the celebration of African humanhood within the enduring structure and sound of the verse.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This project has thoroughly established that the poetry of Maya Angelou and Ifi Amadiume functions as a deliberate and multifaceted poetics of celebrating African humanhood. By examining their distinct yet convergent approaches to themes of identity, resistance, and self affirmation, this study confirms the central thesis: that both poets utilize technical aspects of verse including imagery, tone, rhythm, and structural defiance as powerful tools to reclaim, assert, and celebrate the dignity and wholeness of African and Black identity against centuries of colonial and hegemonic erasure.

A key finding is the strategic use of cultural and ancestral imagery to anchor resistance. Angelou's powerful invocation of the steadfast grandmother figure in "Our Grandmothers," who repeats, "I shall not, I shall not be moved," transforms historical trauma into an unbroken chain of spiritual and cultural continuity. This act of drawing strength from the past is directly mirrored by Amadiume's explicit reclamation of ancient African civilization through the "Nok Lady in Terracotta." By invoking this ancient artifact, Amadiume bypasses the colonial timeline and establishes an indigenous, pre colonial foundation for dignity. Furthermore, both poets employ a language of pride and spirituality to frame anti colonial expression, asserting African centered spiritual worth as an internal, impenetrable shield against external subjugation. This systematic re

inscription of African heritage as the primary site of strength forms the core of their defiant poetics.

The analysis also demonstrated the poets' vigorous assertion of African centered identity in the face of imposed Western standards. Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" offers a radical redefinition of beauty and self worth, explicitly rejecting the limitations of the "fashion model's size" and centering the value of innate personality and confidence. This poetic act directly challenges hegemonic beauty and gender ideals. Amadiume extends this rejection by focusing on autonomy and internal sovereignty. In "Mistress of My Own Being," the speaker retreats to a realm of complete self possession and "calm and supreme" contentment, actively denying the need for external validation. This deliberate act of self definition is crucial, as it shifts the locus of identity from the gaze of the oppressor to the self determined consciousness of the African woman.

The study revealed that the technical elements of voice, rhythm, and repetition become primary vehicles for psychological and emotional restoration. Angelou's use of the persistent, driving rhythm and repetition of "I rise" in "Still I Rise" serves as a therapeutic, liturgical mantra. It transforms the trauma inflicted by "bitter, twisted lies" into an unstoppable, organic force for survival, thereby facilitating psychological restoration by turning resistance into a ritual of healing. Amadiume equally employs these techniques for restorative purposes; in "Creation," the cyclical structure and repetition of regeneration (e.g., "seed took root again") establish the African woman's capacity for

renewal as an indestructible truth, providing emotional refuge and affirming her wholeness despite previous exploitation. Both poets use an affirmative voice to democratize dignity, asserting that wholeness is inherent and can be found in the mundane strength of a grandmother or the defiant joy of a factory worker in "Weekend Glory."

In final assessment, the poetics of celebrating African humanhood is characterized by a unified aesthetic agenda: to dismantle structures of oppression by constructing an undeniable reality of African self worth. Angelou grounds her celebration in the resilience of the Black American oral tradition—using accessible language, powerful refrains, and a conversational, yet authoritative voice to forge communal dignity. Amadiume, engaging with post colonial and indigenous African contexts, employs direct cultural symbolism, regenerative metaphors, and a fierce assertion of personal autonomy to resist exploitation. Their poetry serves as a permanent, citable testament to the power of language in reconstituting identity and affirming the absolute dignity and wholeness of African humanhood for all time.

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