



Research Paper

Anthems of Liberation: Feminist Resilience in Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" and Andra Day's "Rise Up"

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers a comparative feminist reading of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" and Andra Day's "Rise Up", situating them as cultural anthems of resilience and liberation. Although the two emerged from different artistic traditions—poetry and music—both texts share an African American feminist framework that reclaims women's voices from patriarchal and racial oppression. Through Derrida's deconstructionist lens, the study highlights central motifs including the act of rising, confrontation with oppression, sisterhood, collective identity, and the pervasive use of natural and symbolic imagery. Angelou confronts patriarchal power through defiance and reclamation of sexuality, while Day uplifts women through empathy, solidarity, and emotional care. Both works situate personal empowerment within collective struggle, framing liberation as inseparable from women's shared histories and futures. By merging confrontation with compassion, Angelou and Day contribute to the Black-feminist literary and musical tradition where resilience itself becomes revolutionary. Their works demonstrate how art continues to serve as a transformative site for feminist resistance and hope.

KEYWORDS: Maya Angelou; Andra Day; feminism; resilience; Black feminist thought; sisterhood; collective identity; liberation; women's poetry; popular music

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I. INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou remains one of the most influential African-American poets of the twentieth century, celebrated for her ability to merge autobiography, cultural memory, and feminist assertion into her writing. Her works consistently champion independence, dignity, and resilience in the face of systemic racism and patriarchy. The poem "Still I Rise" in particular has become a cornerstone of Black feminist poetics, articulating defiance against historical oppression while affirming personal and collective empowerment [1,2].

Andra Day, a contemporary American singer and performer, extends this legacy through her music, particularly her Grammy-nominated and Golden Globe-winning performances. Her song "Rise Up", which originated as an intimate "prayer" for a friend battling illness, has since been embraced as a global anthem of resilience and hope. While Angelou and Day emerge from different artistic traditions—poetry and performance—their works intersect through a shared African American heritage, their feminist concerns, and commitment to women's solidarity.

This paper undertakes a comparative reading of Angelou's "Still I Rise" and Day's "Rise Up" through the lens of feminist criticism and Derrida's deconstructionist approach. It examines how both texts destabilize patriarchal and oppressive discourses by foregrounding women's empowerment. The analysis focuses on key feminist themes: the act of rising, confrontation with oppression, sisterhood and collective identity, symbolic natural imagery, and visions of freedom. By situating both works within feminist and cultural studies, this paper argues that Angelou and Day's texts function as anthems of liberation that merges confrontation, empathy, and resilience into transformative cultural expressions.

II. THE ACT OF RISING

The central motif uniting both works is the act of "rising." In "Still I Rise", Angelou's title conveys a continuous engagement with resilience, where "still" signifies persistence despite centuries of racial and gender-based oppression. Her use of repetition and rhythm embodies the determination of Black women to endure and transcend marginalization:

"You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise" [3].

Here, rising is not only physical but also symbolic of reclaiming dignity and rewriting cultural narratives. Scholars emphasize that Angelou's repeated invocation of rising transforms poetry into protest, affirming that survival itself is a radical act [5].

Day's "Rise Up", by contrast, frames rising as both a personal and collective call to action. The title immediately signals urgency and hope, urging women to confront hardship through solidarity. In an interview, Day described the song as an emotional prayer for a friend with cancer, but its reception quickly transcended the personal, and resonates as a universal anthem of empowerment [6]. Lines such as:

"And you can't find the fighter
But I can see it in you so we gonna walk it out
And move mountains" [4],

underscores resilience as a shared journey. The speaker encourages women to rediscover their inner strength, positioning rising as an act of collective empowerment. Feminist critics have described "*Rise Up*" as embodying an "ethics of care," where survival and strength emerge through empathy and communal support [7]. Together, both works foreground rising as a feminist metaphor of defiance and liberation, demonstrating that women's survival and empowerment are inherently political acts.

III. CONFRONTATION

Confrontation is another key theme, though it takes different forms in each text. In "Still I Rise", Angelou confronts patriarchal and racial oppressors directly, challenging their attempts to subjugate women—especially Black women—through history. She employs rhetorical questions that both expose and subvert societal expectations:

"Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?" [3]

This passage conveys her firsthand encounters with gender and racial injustices. Yet instead of yielding, Angelou transcends these experiences through assertive sexuality and confidence:

"Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?" [3]

Here, Angelou reclaims control over female sexuality, transforming what patriarchy sought to suppress into a site of power and liberation [8].

Day's confrontation is gentler but equally radical. In "*Rise Up*", the speaker confronts despair itself, reaching out to women who have lost hope, offering encouragement and solidarity. Through lines like:

"And you can't find the fighter
But I can see it in you..." [4]

the confrontation becomes spiritual, affirming the strength within others. Scholars argue that this form of confrontation represents a feminist reimagining of care: instead of rebuke, it is nurturing, reminding women that solidarity can itself be an act of resistance [9].

Angelou's confrontation challenges external oppressors, while Day's nurtures internal resilience. Together, they embody complementary strategies of feminist resistance: one rooted in defiance, the other in compassion.

IV. SISTERHOOD AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Both works emphasize sisterhood and collective identity as central to feminist liberation. Angelou situates her personal struggle within a shared history of African American women's suffering and resilience:

"You may write me down in history...
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave" [3]

By invoking "history" and "ancestors," Angelou asserts that her voice carries the weight of collective struggle. Scholars like Collins and Walker describe this as a distinctly womanist approach, where personal narratives are inseparable from communal identities [10,11].

Similarly, Day emphasizes on collective identity through her repeated shift from the personal pronoun "I" to the collective "we":

"And we will rise,
We'll "Rise Up",
And we'll do it a thousand times again;
For you" [4].

This shift transforms the act of rising into a shared feminist anthem, where individual resilience merges with collective empowerment. Scholars note that such a pronoun shift functions as a linguistic strategy of solidarity, positioning women's survival as a communal struggle rather than an individual one [12]. Both texts thus affirm that feminist empowerment is not a solitary endeavor but one rooted in shared histories, struggles, and dreams.

A similar idea of women bonding on their shared history has been explored in Nancy Cott's *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England*, where the paradox of cultural bondage, a legacy of pain and submission has nonetheless created a sisterly solidarity among women.

V. IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM

Imagery plays a crucial role in how both texts convey resilience. In "Rise Up", Day draws on natural metaphors like "Day," "waves," and "mountains", to illustrate the cyclical nature of struggle and renewal. The imagery of "moving mountains" symbolizes the collective effort needed to dismantle systemic barriers [13]. Angelou employs even richer layers of symbolism in "Still I Rise". She invokes "moons," "suns," "dust," and the "black ocean," creating a cosmic and elemental landscape that situates women's resilience within natural and historical cycles:

"I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide" [3].

The "black ocean" symbolizes both the vastness of collective trauma and the inexhaustible strength of Black women. Mineral imagery such as "oil wells," "diamonds," and "gold" further emphasizes the hidden but abundant potential within marginalized women, suppressed yet irrepressible [14].

Together, these natural and mineral images elevate women's struggles from individual suffering to universal metaphors of endurance, abundance, and renewal.

VI. DREAM OF FREEDOM AND FEMINIST LIBERATION

Ultimately, both works articulate visions of freedom. Angelou's self-assertion as "the hope of the slave" universalizes her personal triumph into a collective dream of liberation from oppression. Critics argued that Angelou's emphasis on hope transforms her poetry into a blueprint for feminist and racial emancipation [15]. Day mirrors this liberatory vision through her persistent refrain:

"I'll "Rise Up",
I'll do it a thousand times again;
For you" [4].

This insistence embodies a feminist ethic of persistence, affirming that the struggle for freedom must be collective and unending. Scholars situate Day's performance within the broader tradition of Black feminist activism, where music and art serve as vehicles for resilience and justice [16].

Both Angelou and Day's works thus frame liberation as both personal and collective: emancipation from the weight of history, and empowerment to envision new futures.

VII. CONCLUSION

A comparative reading of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" and Andra Day's "Rise Up" demonstrates how literature and music converges as feminist anthems of resilience, solidarity, and liberation. Angelou confronts patriarchal and racial oppression with defiance, reclaiming sexuality and history, while Day uplifts women through compassion, solidarity, and spiritual encouragement. Both works rely on natural and symbolic imagery to convey inexhaustible strength, and both affirm that rising is not merely a personal act but a collective reassertion of freedom and identity.

By merging confrontation with empathy, these works articulate a feminist vision where women's voices, whether poetic or musical, become transformative tools for dismantling oppression. They remind us that resilience itself is revolutionary, and that through sisterhood, solidarity, and persistence, women will continue to rise.

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