

## Conflict of Resilience in Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" (1978): Psychosocial Analysis

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### **Abstract:**

*"Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou is a poem that represents the African American experience in the United States. The messages inside the poem declare her liberation from her traumatic past, including racial oppression, national boundaries, and sexism. This research aims to reveal the psychological conflict Maya Angelou encountered while facing trauma as a black race. This research uses a qualitative data collection method that is more descriptive and interpretive by focusing on in-depth observations of themes and imagery in poetry written by Maya Angelou's figure regarding the experience of traumatic events in the past. Using psychosocial analysis by Erik Erikson to find how the speaker's subconscious desires to become more resilient and ultimately love herself after the conflict occurs to her. The writer represents the poem as the resilience of a black woman who went free from her husband even though she experienced psychological conflict. Through her poem titled "Still I Rise", Maya*

*Angelou successfully depicts her psychological issues and how she omitted herself from the traumatic experience of being a second-class citizen living in America, which constantly received oppression and discrimination. Thus, it is found that she did indeed feel inferior to it, but later she chose to be resilient*

**Keywords:** *psychological conflict, resilience, discrimination, race, gender*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The racial discrimination in the United States has been occurring for three centuries (Saputri, 2020). One of the phenomenal issues is a 46 years old black man named George Floyd from the United States was arrested and caught high attention on 25 May 2020. The chronology of events occurred in Minneapolis when George Floyd bought a pack of cigarettes at the supermarket and paid for it with 20 dollars. However, the shop assistant believed that the banknotes were counterfeit and contacted the police because Floyd would not return the cigarettes he had bought. Then a white police officer named Derek Chauvin arrested George Floyd after several fights. Derek committed acts of violence by pressing George's neck with his knee for about nine minutes until George died of suffocation. George's death generated a lot of public attention and the Black Lives Matter campaign emerged. Black Lives Matter is intended to demonstrate police policy in addressing justice issues. A United States court also sentenced Derek Chauvin to 22.5 years in prison for being the perpetrator of the murder of George Floyd. This phenomenon was caused by the stereotype of the people in the United States that white people are superior and black people are inferior. Moreover, it was difficult for white people in the United States to assimilate black people due to the initial arrival of black people to the United States only as slave workers and a mindset was formed about black people as inferior. The phenomenon of racism experienced by the black race is an issue that continues to occur and even raises pro controversies in society.

Next phenomenon that contains the issue of black racism is the death of Ahmaud Arbery who was killed by three white residents near his house in February 2020, right after George Floyd was killed. Ahmaud Arbery is a 25 year old black man who lives in Fancy Bluff, United States. According to Fausset (2022), Ahmaud Arbery was running in Satilla Shores and a man saw him drive past his driveway. The man who saw Ahmaud Arbery passing around his yard named Gregory McMichael thought that Arbery was someone suspicious trying to break into his area so he called his son Travis McMichael to carry out the action. Ahmaud Armed with an a.357 magnum and a shotgun, the two men chased Arbery and then killed him. After this incident, two months later the two men were arrested by the police and jailed for life. The racist phenomenon between blacks and whites does not only occur in men but also women.

Another phenomenon that contains the issue of black people being inferior to white people comes from the artist and singer named Mariah Carey. The singer of the song titled *Hero* said that when she was young, she was bullied and ostracized by her friends just because her skin color was different from her other friends. Also, when she wanted to hang out with other friends, she found it difficult to communicate; she was even ostracized by two large groups in America, namely white and black people. Not only was she experiencing this kind of problem, but her parents were also experiencing the same thing as Carey. Mariah Carey's father was a black African-American man, while her mother was a white-skinned British woman. Of course, this caused a debate between the two because she lived in her mother's society, where most people were white since childhood. So, it is common for his family to always move places to avoid this racist behavior. Not only was he experiencing this kind of problem, but his parents were also experiencing the same thing as Carey. Mariah Carey's father was a black African American man, while his mother was a white British woman. Of course, this caused a debate between the two because Carey lived in her mother's environment where most of the people were white since childhood. So, it is common for his family to always move places to avoid this racist behavior. Even when Mariah Carey was as successful as she is now, her cynical view of her had not disappeared. Even the title of 'diva' she holds often gets a negative meaning (Octaviyani, 2022). Based on this phenomenon, it can be said that the issue of racism experienced by these three persons are not only black men but also black women who are being discriminated against in their society because they have black skin. In addition, when they are treated with racism by their social environment, it is not uncommon for them to end up being psychologically disturbed, not only for themselves, but for their families who have the same skin color will experience psychological disorders. The issue of racism then develops into an analysis that can be used with different methods and approaches. This issue also can be used not only for analyzing popular text such as magazines, online newspapers, etc. or cultural text, it also can be analyzed in literary text or literary work.

Literary work is an art in which there is an expression of events experienced by humans in the form of experiences, thoughts, ideas, enthusiasm and even feelings experienced by humans themselves. One of the literary works in which humans can express their thoughts, ideas, enthusiasm, etc., is poetry. There are many definitions of poetry. Sifa (2017) suggests that poetry is the most ancient form of literature among other literary works. Since being introduced for the first time to the public, poetry has shown the characteristics contained in it, including the choice of words, diction, rhymes, stanzas and various elements in the poem, which are neatly arranged, structured, and the words in the poem are beautified so that attract readers. Another definition of poetry or poem comes from Arbi (2018) that poetry or poem is a work of literature close to the language and spirit. Poetry includes intrinsic elements, such as themes, imagery, figurative language and symbols. One of the poets who used poetry as a medium to express their isolation from the environment is Maya Angelou.

Maya Angelou is a famous poet, memoirist, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, actress, singer, historian, filmmaker and civil rights activist in the 17 until 18th century (Jayageetha et al., 2018). She is an African-American woman who lives in America, where whites dominate society. Each important action by Maya Angelou as a civil rights activist who raises equality as Americans through poems with the theme of racism and discrimination. In writing her poetry, Maya Angelou uses a Feminist approach that expresses the discrimination, race and segregation experienced by black women in America (Mustantifa et al., 2022). Three poems by Maya Angelou reflect African-American women who have self-respect: *Ain't That Bad*, "Still I Rise", and *Weekend Glory*. One of the poems which the researcher wants to analyze is Maya Angelou's poem entitled "Still I Rise", in which the researcher will analyze the psychological aspects through themes and imagery in the poem.

"Still I Rise" (1978) is a poem written by Maya Angelou which has an issue of marginalization, racism, injustice, etc., among black women in American society. It is a powerful poem that shows a range of influences, including her background and the 'black' in African-American society. This poem has some messages about liberation, equality, survival, etc., among black women who lived in American society. Not only that, this poem also talks about the conflict between black women and white people or white men, where black women want to be free from the oppression of white males or white men. Maya Angelou's *And* "Still I Rise" is a powerful poem that draws the influence of her life, including her background and African-American experience in the United States (Hasan & Ibrahim, 2021). The poem "Still I Rise" has a message of liberation and survival of black women who are being oppressed by the white. The poetry has 43 lines which have been divided into 9 stanzas. The five rhymes of this poem is ABCB, while four rhymes in the last is ABCC, with the word "*I rise*" repeated three times at the poem's end.

The main issue raised in the poem "Still I Rise" is about psychological conflicts experienced by Maya Angelou as a black person or African-American through themes and imagery in the poem "Still I Rise". Maya Angelou reveals that she and her people would continue to rise against racism and discrimination (Widjayanti, 2019). The object of this study will focus on Maya Angelou's experience in dealing with bad treatment from people around her. In other words, how Maya Angelou encountered while facing trauma from racism and discrimination and how she tried to solve the condition. The researcher read line by line of the poetry to find themes and imagery which contain psychological aspects experienced by Maya Angelou. This research aims to reveal the psychological conflict Maya Angelou encountered while facing trauma as a black race. This research will use qualitative methods as data collection which is more descriptive and interpretive by focusing on in-depth observations through themes and imagery regarding the experiences of traumatic events in the past by Maya Angelou.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To conduct this research, the researchers will use qualitative research methods for data collection. According to Nur & Miranti (2018), a qualitative research method is to understand social phenomena based on the participants' point of view. Another definition of qualitative research came from Aspers & Corte (2019) who stated that qualitative research methods are multimethod in focus including the interpretative and naturalistic approach to its subject matter. Or in the other words, qualitative research studies about things in the environment / natural settings to interpret the phenomena in terms of the meaning the people bring to them (Aspers & Cotre, 2019). The participants here are the researchers who read the poem “Still I Rise” many times until they get the desired interpretation. By reading many times, the researchers used a close-reading method to get an in-depth understanding of the poem. A close-reading method is a research method that aims to read the literary work more than once. By collecting data such as reading poems line by line and stanza by stanza. Then, the researcher will select and determine the theme of the poem “Still I Rise” and the words or sentences of imagery that contain Maya Angelou's psychological experience through her life as a black or African-American woman who was oppressed by white people.

This research will also use the approach of one of the psychologists who developed the theory of psychoanalysis, Erik Erikson. The development of psychoanalysis theory which we used in this research named psychosocial theory. Psychosocial theory is the theory which draws the parallels in childhood stages when it expands to include the influence of social dynamics as well as the extension of psychosocial development into adulthood (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). By using Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, the researcher will discover how the social environment affects the creation of success for someone who has experienced something *traumatic* in their life. According to Erik Erikson (1993), a person is formed through a series of psychosocial stages that must be passed successfully. Each psychosocial stage is considered a conflict or crisis that the individual must overcome to achieve optimal development and form a positive identity.

The data collection in this study is divided into two parts, primary and secondary. The primary data of this study is the poem text of “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou. The secondary data of this research are taken from print and online media scattered in libraries and also through online media. Sample collection will be minimized by focusing only on Angelou's life and essential theories for this research. The technique of data collection in this study consists of the following steps: (1) the researchers reads and understands the psychosocial analysis theory proposed by Erik Erikson; (2) the researchers understands and analyzes the content of Maya Angelou's poem entitled “Still I Rise”; (3) the researchers identifies words and symbols in the poem; (4) the researchers connects themes and symbols with psychosocial development stages; (5) the researchers analyzes emotional implications.

The technique of data analysis in this study uses the theory of psychoanalysis by Erik Erikson. The technique of data analysis in this study consists of the following steps: (1) the researchers analyze the data collection based on a psychological approach; (2) the researchers analyze the data collection by outlining the explanation according to the theory applied; (3) the researchers interpret the finding and conclude.

## **FINDINGS**

Based on the data found in the analysis that researchers conducted to reveal the conflict obtained by Maya Angelou in her life using psychosocial analysis, it can be said that Maya Angelou shows a desire to rise and achieve success despite having experienced difficulties and failures. A psychosocial analysis is an approach to psychology that focuses on the interplay between an individual's internal psychological experiences and social environment. It recognizes that internal psychological processes and external social factors, such as family dynamics, cultural values, and societal norms, influence individual development. In this Psychosocial analysis, Erik Erikson puts forward a theory of psychosocial development that includes eight stages or phases:

1. Trust vs. Mistrust
2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt
3. Initiative vs. Guilt
4. Industry vs. Inferiority
5. Identity vs. Role Confusion
6. Intimacy vs. Isolation
7. Generativity vs. Stagnation
8. Integrity vs. Despair

In this research, the fourth stage is a suitable stage to analyze further the poem's content and the thoughts of Maya Angelou. The stage Erik Erikson said above, the fourth stage of the eight stages stated, has matched this poem. It is 'Industry vs. Inferiority,' where Maya Angelou desires to rise and achieve success despite having experienced difficulties and failures. According to Erik Erikson (1950), during the industry versus inferiority stage, children develop a sense of competence in performing various tasks, such as reading, writing, and solving problems. They also become more interested in exploring the world around them and interacting with their peers. Success in this stage leads to a sense of industry, where children feel confident and competent in achieving their goals. However, failure to develop a sense of competence can lead to feelings of inferiority, where children feel inadequate and unable to perform tasks to the expected level. This can lead to low self-esteem and low confidence in their abilities.

In other theories of imagery, there are five kinds of imagery shown in "Still I Rise"; Visual Imagery, Gustatory Imagery, Audio Imagery, Kinesthetic Imagery, and Tactile Imagery. The intrinsic analysis for a poem to be interpreted as a depiction of the poet's mind through an object, situation, and event that is experienced and written in metaphorical words.

Siti (2018) analyzed the imagery of “Still I Rise” by qualitative methods per stanza. The first imagery Maya Angelou used is Visual, which she found in five stanzas of Maya Angelou's poem.

### **Visual Imagery**

Visual imagery uses descriptive language that evokes sensory experiences related to sight, allowing the reader to vividly visualize what the writer or speaker of the poem is describing. In other words, the poet appeals to the reader's vision by describing what the narrator of the poem sees including color, brightness, shape, size and pattern.

First stanza:

Line 3 - You may tread me in the *very dirt*.

In this sentence, Maya Angelou uses visual imagery to portray the experience of her being abused, depicting the feeling of being treated like dirt.

Line 4 - But still, like *dust*, I'll rise.

Maya Angelou pictured her spirit as light as *dust*, that whatever happened, she would rise again.

Third Stanza:

Line 9 - Just like *moons* and like *suns*

Maya Angelou illustrated *moons* and *suns* will set and rise as night and day comes, just like her hopes being tested by the life she lived, but still, she had her hopes high.

Seventh Stanza:

Line 25 - Does my *sexiness* upset you?

Maya Angelou seems to provoke her abuser who is getting upset because of her that they wanted to kill her in the sixth stanza. The *sexiness* she mentioned portrays her feminine yet bold character of hers.

Eight Stanza:

Line 33 - I'm a *black ocean*, leaping and wide

Maya Angelou declares that no matter what is done to her, she will rise like a vast, mighty *black ocean*, surging and swelling as she rides the tide.

Last stanza:

Line 35 - Leaving behind *nights* of terror and fear

Line 37 - Into a *daybreak* that's wondrously clear

Maya Angelou proclaims that even though she is leaving behind nights of terror and fear, she will rise up and embrace a wondrously clear daybreak.

### **Gustatory Imagery**

Gustatory imagery is a form of sensory language poets use to describe the sense of taste and flavor in their poems. Only one sentence per imagery from the poem “Still I Rise” is found in gustatory and audio.

First stanza:

Line 2 - With your *bitter*, twisted lies.

Maya Angelou describes how she was abused with bitter and twisted lies in an attempt to bring her down.

### **Audio Imagery**

Auditory imagery is used to describe sounds heard within the poem. In addition, sound devices such as onomatopoeia, which are words that imitate sounds, can effectively express sound descriptions within poetry.

Fifth stanza:

Line 19 - ‘Cause I *laugh* like I’ve got gold mines.

In this line Maya Angelou says that she can laugh as if she has a lot of wealth or riches, like they own gold mines. Laughing as if she has nothing to worry about, just as someone with many gold mines might feel financially secure and worry-free. Basically, Maya Angelou is using the metaphor of owning gold mines to express how happy and carefree she feels.

### **Kinesthetic Imagery**

Kinesthetic imagery is a technique poets use to describe the sensation of movement or bodily motion, even still or static objects. This technique can add any dynamic, lifelike quality to the description and make it feel more engaging for the reader.

First stanza:

Line 1 - You may *write* me down in history

Line 4 - But still, like dust, I’ll *rise*.

Maya Angelou uttered that even though she was written down in history by all the dark lies her abuser gave, she still rose up from her place.

Second stanza:

Line 7 - ‘Cause I walk like I’ve got *oil wells*

Maya Angelou pictured herself as a confident person who has oil wells like she has the most needed and expensive thing in the world.

Line 15 - Shoulders *falling down* like teardrops.

The abusive life she experienced makes her ask, should she fall down and just give up on all her life matters?



Fifth stanza:

Line 20 - *Diggin ' in my own backyard*

Digging here refers to the previous line in which she got a gold mine in her own backyard.

Sixth stanza:

Line 21 - You may *shoot* me with your words,

Line 22 - You may *cut* me with your eyes,

Line 23 - You may *kill* me with your hatefulness.

Maya Angelou said through these sentences what the abuser possibly did, getting her shot, cut, or killed.

Seventh stanza:

Line 27 - That I *dance* like I've got diamonds

Eight stanzas:

Line 33 - I'm a black ocean, *leaping* and wide,

Nine stanzas:

Line 35 - *Leaving* behind nights of terror and fear

Line 39 - *Bringing* the gifts that my ancestors gave,

From seventh until nine stanzas, describing herself that whatever the abuser does to her, she is still invincible and rises.

### **Tactile Imagery**

Tactile Imagery describes the way something feels. This type of imagery illustrates touch traits like hardness, softness, wetness, or temperature. However, no sentence contains tactile imagery found in "Still I Rise".

From Siti's discoveries, researchers of this paper conclude the imagery of "Still I Rise" is Maya Angelou's will to rise upon her abuser with confidence without complaining about anything that could bring her down. Maya Angelou expressed her resistance and persistence to face her abused life using many metaphors. In addition, the reason why Maya Angelou wrote the poem "Still I Rise" is due to the experience of the black women in Africa and African - American that experienced a disconnection from their social and cultural roots that led to a lack of complete assimilation into the patriarchal society in which socially black women get marginalized and faced the burden of seen as an inferior, that resulted in them unable to express their pride as women that makes Maya Angelou wrote the poem "Still I Rise" as a representation of women strength against the society (Oday, 2021).

## DISCUSSION

The industry vs inferiority stage in Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory occurs at 6-12 years when children learn to build skills and feel inferior if they fail. Erik Erikson also says in his book that if previously children were mainly in the family environment, at this stage, children will go out a lot to the school environment. Meanwhile, according to Piaget (1952), children aged 6-12 are in the Concrete Operational stage. Children already have logical thinking skills, but only with concrete objects. Researchers find several elements related to this stage in the poem "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou.

At the poem's beginning, Maya Angelou emphasizes her resilience and ability to rise above her failures and oppression.

"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."

This can be attributed to the stages of the industry, where individuals learn to build skills and abilities to achieve goals and feel productive. Maya Angelou demonstrated her ability to rise and succeed despite obstacles and hurdles.

Another example found from these lines is when Maya Angelou stated that the oppressor fancied the oppression condition. However, instead of feeling intimidated by them, Maya Angelou decided to be fully aware of and embrace the condition. In this line, she would like to emphasize that she denies the terrible condition she once faced would truly affect her in ferocious writing.

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

The line "*Did you want to see me broken?*" shows that she felt destined to fail and be destroyed by the oppression she experienced.

However, in the end, Maya Angelou overcome her feelings of inferiority and achieved victory over all her obstacles. This is shown in stanza number 6 of the poem.

"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."

Maya Angelou illustrates that no matter what the perpetrators do to her, Maya Angelou will still exist like the wind that always exists, even though humans breathe it every day. In this case, Maya Angelou shows that something big made her afraid and traumatized, but it did not stop her from rising from that adversity. According to Kinasih (2023), a factor that can change people who cannot accept their surroundings is their internal processes.

Maya Angelou's willingness to dare all the oppression and discrimination are shown in the eighth and the last stanza 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 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”

From all of these stanzas, it can be concluded that Maya Angelou vows to rise above the oppression and discrimination that she experienced in the past. Maya Angelou is proud of what she has now even though she is a black woman and she proves that she can rise from the ‘*nightmare*’ or wounds she has felt in the past as someone who is being oppressed and discriminated against by white people in American society. In the last stanza, for example, we can see that Maya Angelou has managed to overcome the wounds she has experienced and is trying to turn a new leaf with the newest version of herself. Maya Angelou also hopes that black women being oppressed and discriminated against by the people around her will see and emulate how she tries to escape oppression and discrimination by white people in her environment. Not only that, the poem “Still I Rise” also becomes a reminder for the black women of the abuses of power for those who sit in government, military, judiciary, military, or police force. Therefore, black women at that time fought against the injustice that befell them and this was the forerunner of Maya Angelou writing the poem “Still I Rise” poem because she herself experienced that incident (Spacey,2023). In addition, Maya Angelou also said that don't give up hope for those who are oppressed and receive discriminatory treatment from the environment around them. With a great effort to rise from the downturn, there is a glimmer of hope for them to escape from it all (Editor, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The inferiority experienced by Maya Angelou is strongly illustrated in her stanzas of poetry written by her, one of which is in the initial stanza, where Maya Angelou states that she is often the target of hatred, diatribes, and oppression because of her black skin color. This situation made her feel inferior or low self-esteem because the majority of white society did not accept her. However, because of those horrible experiences she faced, as written in the poem, Maya Angelou found the strength to fight back and gather all of her courage. The title of this poem, “Still I Rise”, is made to emphasize that Maya Angelou and other people from the black race would rise from enslavement.

The results of this study provide new insights into Maya Angelou's “Still I Rise” poem from a psychosocial perspective. This poem by Maya Angelou contains unpleasant experiences faced by the speaker. In other words, using the Psychosocial approach this analysis can bring a new interpretation of the content of the poem. Thus, the researcher found that Maya Angelou was quite aware of her unpleasant position and felt inferior, based on Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial behavior.

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