

# Nature as the Allay to Renewal of Woman Life in Maya Angelou's "Woman Work"

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## Nature as the Ally to Renewal of Woman Life in Maya Angelou's "Woman Work"

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### Abstract

The research aimed to discuss nature as the ally to the renewal of woman life in Maya Angelou's poem entitled "Woman Work." The speaker of the poem found her comfort and strength when she dealt herself with the nature. The topic of the research was revealed by three poetic devices, that is, symbol, personification and apostrophe. The speaker tended to perpetuate nature as her assistant to live her life. Nature is the most important life source of the speaker. Besides the theory of nature, that of ecofeminism was applied to analyze the poem, entitled "Woman Work." There were three approaches that were used: anthropocentric, formalist and structural approaches. Library research was the technique of data collecting. The finding of the research was the woman felt that nature was important to her because it was the only thing in her life that did not add any stress and was an outlet for the busy day. The speaker of the poem found peace when she was within the nature. She summoned sun, rain, snow, moon, stars and other elements of nature which she wanted most to accompany her for accomplishing her daily routine activities and renew her life for her better tomorrow in order that she was able to survive for completing her days.

**Keywords:** *nature, ally, woman, ecofeminism*

### Introduction

Nature is the mother and teacher of mankind. It is a bounteous treasure of emotions and feelings. Nature and environment is part and parcel of all living beings in this world. Nature is related to woman. The woman is always the most discussed topic all the countries of the world and in whole history of the universe. Some groups talk against her and some other fight for her rights. Even now in few regions of the world, woman is living in a very disgusting condition and at the same time, she is enjoying the beauty, adornments and luxury of the world with equal status as the man. There are many literary works that depict what the woman has done dealing with the equality with the man and fought for in the family and society, how she is able to survive in her sense of the inferiority, and how she can solve her obstacles with the oppressors when she becomes the oppressed. Literature also becomes a means of expressing those things dealing with the experiences of woman in living her life. Ecocriticism explores the relationship between literature and the natural world. It analyzes the role that the natural environment plays in the imagination in the minds of the writers of literary works. According to Glotfelty in Garrard (2004: 3), ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Furthermore, dealing with the connections between women and nature, it comes to another literary term, that is, ecofeminism. According to Warren, according to ecofeminists, trees, water, animals, toxics, and nature are feminist issues because understanding them helps one understand the status and plight of women cross-culturally (1997: 4). Ecofeminists examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature. For women, nature is an ally. Therefore, the destruction of nature conducted by some irresponsible beings becomes women's trigger to save the environment. According to Bennett, taking an ecofeminist approach in analyzing literature seems natural, then, because literature, by its definition in society, has been used to make the theoretical practical, to transform complex philosophy into concrete experience through the imagination (2005: 65). The idea of ecofeminism is also revealed in Maya Angelou's poems, entitled "Woman Work."

The historical background of the poem writing is that there were social movements defined the 1970s: Environmentalism, Feminism, and Gay Rights. Major environmental legislation was passed, most notably the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, followed by the Clean Water Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. As concern for the environment and its resources increased, so did the interest in nuclear power. Warren said

For example, in Washington, D.C., while the Potomac River was cleaned up to enhance tourism and recreation, the Anacostia River, which runs through one of the city's African-American communities, was not cleaned up. This neglect of African-American and other communities led to declining air and water quality, increased toxic exposure, increased health risks, and a declining quality of life (1997: 39).

Maya Angelou explores her worries of natural destruction through her "Woman Work" in which the speaker of the poem eulogizes the elements of nature that are able to rejuvenate her soul because of her daily burdens of hard work.

Moreover, there are some main components of nature in the poem, such as sun, rain, snow drops and so on. The speaker loves the sunshine and the rain that could purify her. She wants to bury herself under the snow flakes. Nature would help her recover her loss of energy. She considers nature as her only well-wisher and ally. Maya Angelou provides the reader with details of her speaker's workaday world, a world in which every day is like the last, and relief is found only in communing with nature. Angelou's masterful manipulation of words presents two possible

scenarios: the speaker is a slave or she is representative of any woman whose daily life is dedicated to caring for others. Besides the theory of nature, there are some poetic devices that are used to analyze the poem, that is, symbol, personification, and apostrophe. A symbol is something that is literally itself (a shiny, patent leather shoe, for example) at the same time that it represents or suggests something else (childish innocence or purity). In other words, a symbol is a literal object or thing that suggests another level of meaning; a symbol may suggest a person, an abstraction, or an idea. A symbol is basically a kind of image, differing from other images in the use to which it is put (Kenney, 2005: 75). A symbol in a story may, in fact, harbor multiple levels of meaning.

Additionally, as a literary device, personification is the projection of characteristics that normally belong only to humans onto inanimate objects, animals, deities, or forces of nature. These characteristics can include verbs of actions that only humans do or adjectives that describe a human condition. The characteristics can also be emotions, feelings, or motives given to objects incapable of thought. For example, if someone said, "the trees whispered their discontent," this would personify the trees both as able to whisper and of feeling unhappy. Barnett states that personification is a kind of figurative language in which an inanimate object, animal or other nonhuman is given human traits (2005: 1541).

6  
But Time did beckon to the flowers, and they  
By noon most cunningly did steal away.  
-- Herbert

Herbert attributes a human gesture to Time and shrewdness to flowers. Of all figures, personification most surely gives to airy nothings a local habitation and a name.

In the poem, the speaker summons the elements of nature that seems like she would like to address her friends. Apostrophe is addressing someone that is absent or dead or something non human as if that person or thing is present and alive, can reply to what is being said. Greenblatt (2006: 429) gives an example of apostrophe derived from John Donne's poem entitled "The Sun Rising"

"Busy old fool, unruly Sun,  
Why dost thou thus,  
Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?  
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?  
Saucy pedantic wretch,"

The poet addresses the sun in an informal and colloquial way as if it were a real human being. He asks the Sun in a rude way why the Sun appeared and spoiled the good time he was having with his beloved.

Additionally, the speaker of the poem finds her peace when she is accompanied by nature. She feels relieved when she gives in herself to nature. Nature, in the broadest sense, is the natural, physical, or material world or universe. "Nature" can refer to the phenomena of the physical world, and also to life in general. The study of nature is a large part of science. Although humans are part of nature, human activity is often understood as a separate category from other natural phenomena.

According to Rothenberg,  
The word *natura* is derived from the Latin word *natura*, or "essential qualities, innate disposition", and in ancient times, literally meant "birth". *Natura* is a Latin translation of the Greek word *physis*, which originally related to the intrinsic characteristics that plants, animals, and other features of the world develop of their own accord (2011: 23).

1  
The concept of nature as a whole, the physical universe, is one of several expansions of the original notion; it began with certain core applications of the word *physis* by pre-Socratic philosophers, and has steadily gained currency ever since. This usage continued during the advent of modern scientific method in the last several centuries. Within the various uses of the word today, "nature" often refers to geology and wildlife. Nature can refer to the general realm of living plants and animals, and in some cases to the processes associated with inanimate objects-the way that particular types of things exist and change of their own accord, such as the weather and geology of the Earth.

The poem suggests that the speaker is allied with the nature. She feels comfortable and safe with the nature. She has done her boring routine courses, but she keeps doing them day by day. The tiredness she feels dissipated when she becomes one with the nature.

### Method of Research

The poem entitled "Woman Work" written by Maya Angelou is the object of the research. The primary data of the research are taken from the lines of the poem that deal with the topic of the research. The poem entitled "Woman Work" consists of five stanzas. The uniqueness of the poem is stated in the first stanza that consists of fourteen lines. What makes it unique is that the speaker seems like telling the readers the unstoppable courses she does for the whole day. There are no punctuations in the first stanza, even the readers who read it feel breathless.

The method that is used in the research is descriptive method. Punch explains that descriptive method is setting out to collect, organize and summarize information about the matter being studied (2000: 38). Furthermore, there three approaches which are used to support the analysis. The approaches intended include, structural, formalist and anthropocentric approaches. Structural approach is applied in this research because this kind of approach is very effective for analyzing a poem which has some poetic meaning of the words. 2

Additionally, the method of collecting the data is the library research. George states that library research involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or personal/expert opinion on a research

question; necessary component of every other research method at some point (2008: 6). It means that some materials in the form of printed media are needed in order to support the analysis. Moreover, the data are also collected from some literary sites in the internet to support the analysis.

Structural approach concentrates on each constituent of the construction. By understanding the meaning of the words, the truth can be discovered. D'haen states that structural approach is producing relevant results by looking in places where one would not look without being urged by sturdy model (2014: 143). In other words, the structural approach is used to get the mastery over the structures. It concentrates on each word to get the detailed meaning.

Formalist criticism regards literature as a unique form of human's knowledge that needs to be examined in its own terms. The natural, sensible starting point is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves. To explore the intense relationship within a poem is done by close reading, a careful step-by-step analysis and explication of a text. The formalist criticism which is now called as the new criticism or formalistic approach is defined by Guerin as the assumption that a given literary experience takes a shape proper to itself, or at the least that the shape and the experience are functions of each other (2005: 83). It means that the formalist criticism is concerned primarily with the work itself. The form and content cannot be meaningfully separated since the various stylistic elements of literary work influence each other.

Another approach that is used in the research is anthropocentric approach. Anthropocentrism is a tendency to view nature as an expendable resource for mankind's benefit. Warren said that since ecofeminism insists that feminism must address not only the forms of oppression which afflict humans but also those that afflict nature, the extension of feminist insights and models of centrism to illuminate problems in the concept of anthropocentrism is a core concern of the ecofeminism theoretical project (1994: 327). In the poem, the benefit the speaker gains is that she has found comfort when she gives in herself with the nature. She feels that being together with nature she feels relieved and peaceful. She admires nature as the core of her happiness.

## Discussion

Every poem conveys an experience or attempts to arouse certain feelings in the reader. When the reader has read a poem and given its general and detailed meaning, he/she should try to decide what feelings the poet is trying to arouse in him/her. A poem may affect different people in a great variety of ways and it is often impossible to define a poet's 'true' intentions.

Similarly to the poem entitled "Woman Work" written by Maya Angelou, we have learned that the speaker of the poem is a woman who is probably a single mother and a slave. She does the same things all day long, then she finally tries to feel relaxation by giving up her body and soul to the nature. She depends on her survival to the world of nature. All day she works like a machine in house. She becomes tired and bored. She wants to give herself relief from her responsibilities because she is fed up with her monotonous homely life. Therefore, she desires to go in the lap of nature. Nature would help her rejuvenate and recover her lost energy. She considers nature as her only well-wisher. She does not like to seek peace in the mechanical aspects of life. She lives to be a part of nature to have a permanent bliss and calmness in her life. She feels completely exhausted and wants to be rescued by the nature. She wants to feel lost in the wonders of nature. Therefore, she is allied with the nature, such as: sun, rain, storm, snowflake and other elements of nature. The woman feels that nature is important to her because it is the only thing in her life that does not add any stress and is an outlet for the busy day. The poem is the following:

|                               |                |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Woman Work                    | (Maya Angelou) |
| I've got the children to tend |                |
| The clothes to mend           |                |
| The floor to mop              |                |
| The food to shop              |                |
| Then the chicken to fry       | (5)            |
| The baby to dry               |                |
| I got company to feed         |                |
| The garden to weed            |                |
| I've got shirts to press      |                |
| The tots to dress             | (10)           |
| The cane to be cut            |                |
| I gotta clean up this hut     |                |
| Then see about the sick       |                |
| And the cotton to pick.       |                |
| Shine on me, sunshine         | (15)           |
| Rain on me, rain              |                |
| Fall softly, dewdrops         |                |
| And cool my brow again.       |                |
| Storm, blow me from here      |                |
| With your fiercest wind       | (20)           |
| Let me float across the sky   |                |
| 'Til I can rest again.        |                |
| Fall gently, snowflakes       |                |
| Cover me with white           |                |



Cold icy kisses and (25)  
Let me rest tonight.

Sun, rain, curving sky  
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone  
Star shine, moon glow  
You're all that I can call my own. (30)

#### **Sun and Rain**

There are two elements of nature that are mentioned in the second stanza, that is, sun and rain. In the fifteenth line, the speaker said, "Shine on me, sunshine." The speaker utters the most important element of nature, "sunshine". The sun rises and reaches its peak and then falls below the horizon to face the dark, to go up the next morning in the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. "Sun" is the first element of nature that the speaker mentions may mean the recharging her energy. After she has worked all day long, she surrenders her soul and body to the solar system and needs the shine of the sun shining on her body in order that she is able to live her hard life. Not only has the sun been a symbol of the cycle of life, but also that of power, growth, health and passion throughout time. Some believe it is a representation of the higher self, while others see the sun as a god to be worshiped. The "sun" is the major element of nature that the speaker firstly has in her mind when she wants to be friends with, so that she is able to let her boredom and stress of her long day of work.

After getting recharged, the speaker feels hot because of full of energy. Then she mentions the second element of nature, "rain". After the sun, it comes raining. It seems like the old saying said. The sixteenth line, "Rain on me, rain" said the speaker. Then, she addresses "rain". Rain is the life-blood of every living being. Rain is a cooling, calming, and soothing system. Since rain is a common natural occurrence vital for life, rainfall can also represent rebirth and emotional cleansing. In some geographical areas where rain is not abundant, rainfall causes emotional relief and happiness. Likely to the area in which the speaker lives, it has warm climate that can be seen from the plantations, cotton and sugarcane. Rain rarely happens in the area where the speaker lives, therefore she misses the rain. She addresses "rain" to rain on her because she wants her emotional stress to be cleaned and washed by the rain. It seems when the speaker is sad or pensive, the rain can wash away her sorrow and help clear her mind. This catharsis occurs often, because, firstly the speaker feels a literal welcoming cooling on her body, but also a metaphorical washing away of problems.

Furthermore, it is similar to "rain", that is, the last element of nature which is mentioned by the speaker in the second stanza is "dewdrops". Consider the lines below:

Fall softly, dewdrops  
And cool my brow again.

Generally speaking the symbolism of dew is closely akin to that of rain, but its influence is of a more subtle order. "Dew" is little rain that comes after the hard rain. The speaker, once again, asks "dew" or "gentle rain" to fall on her for cooling her. The speaker's burning soul can only quench her thirst if raindrops fall on her. The gloom of her heart can be illuminated by the dazzling light of sun only. Her burning forehead is deprived of the soft and healing touch of a dear of near one, so it can only be comforted by the soft rhythm of dewdrops.

#### **Storm**

The elements of storm consist of air, water and wind. Air may symbolize thought, water—emotion, and wind—anger. Consider the following stanza successively:

Storm, blow me from here  
With your fiercest wind (20)  
Let me float across the sky  
'Til I can rest again.

"Storm" is the apostrophe in this stanza. The speaker begs "storm" to blow her far away she could be. She likes wandering into the sky to find her comfort better than lying on her bed to take a rest. She prefers choosing "storm" and it seems like she holds grudge against something. Storm particularly may represent emotional stirrings or cleansing. The speaker may have negative thoughts that require washing away so that she can restore the health of the psyche and return to her regular path in life.

"With your fiercest wind" implicitly means that she wants to go far away from where she is now. She needs some comfort and generative power to continue her life. The word "fiercest" the speaker uses refers to the wind that she thinks can blow her away as far as it can. She gets along with the storm that can take her away from where she is now. The storm takes her to the place where she can get more energy for her tomorrow. Being blown by the storm, she feels that she is able to wander to the world of freedom where she can take a rest again and stop doing her tiring and unstoppable work. She feels that she gives up her soul to the Mother Earth—nature. She wants to be united to the world of nature that may give her comfort and joyful spirit of life. In these lines she asks storm to blow her from the busy world across the sky with its stormy wind. As such she will be able to get relief from the hurly burly of life. She asks the storm to take her to an imaginary world for rest.

#### **Snowflakes**

Traditionally, snow signifies winter and the end of the growing season. Because of its relation to the end of growth in the natural world, snow is often linked to death and hardships. Nevertheless, it is different from the speaker's intention for addressing "snow" in the poem. Consider the fourth stanza of the poem "Woman Work" successively:

Fall gently, snowflakes  
Cover me with white  
Cold icy kisses and  
Let me rest tonight.

(25)

This stanza is also an expression of taking relief and refuge with natural objects. The speaker asks the snowflakes to fall gently on her body and completely cover it up and make it all white. When she will be completely under the charm and burden of the white snow, she will get solace. Furthermore, she asks "snow" to touch and give her "cold icy kisses", so that she may be able to have rest that night. Actually the natural objects can please a person and give company for some time.

The speaker intends to mention the "snowflakes" and wants them "fall gently" to her because she feels that snow covers everything and changes a familiar landscape into something new. It can be associated with transformation. It seems that snow is used to depict a life-changing situation. Snow transforms a familiar landscape that can become a magical wonderland covering all with the white. Not only does the speaker feel comfortable but also wants to purify her hard life with the spirit of nature that comes to her soul for continuing her life again. The speaker needs something that can relieve her from her tiresome. Her exhaustion makes her desperately wish for something that is irrational. "Cold icy kisses and Let me rest tonight" shows the absence of living being's warmth. She does not have any companions around her, so she surrenders herself to the nature and asks it to lull her in order that she is able to rest from her burden of unstoppable routine work over and over again. It seems that she also suffers from insomnia because she always thinks over the next day she has to face again and again.

#### **Other Elements of Nature**

Last stanza is the most emphatic and touching where the predicament of a lonely soul has been exposed. The woman who is taken as an entity or commodity, when realizes her worthlessness and absurdity of life, she invokes the objects of Nature one by one, consider the following stanza:

Sun, rain, curving sky  
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone  
Star shine, moon glow  
You're all that I can call my own.

(30)

The desire to take some rest or respite even for a single night points towards the insomnia suffered by the woman who exhausts herself to death during the day. But it is surprising that despite so much exertion she cannot go to sleep. Definitely, some mental or psychological ailment keeps her awake. In the present stanza as well as in the previous one the word 'rest' is repeated twice. At one place she says, "Till I can rest again" and then reiterates, "Let me rest tonight". And finally gives vent to her suppressed emotions and creates such a beauty in world literature by uttering the line: "You're all that I can call my own". It can be inferred from the above-mentioned line that she is going through the extreme phase of alienation and estrangement in her own family. And, she is united within nature.

In these lines of the last stanza, the speaker addresses all the natural objects to help her in giving relief from the busy life of a working woman. She wants to lose herself among the natural objects. Therefore, she asks the sun, rain, the curving sky, the mountains, the ocean, the leaf and the stone to give her relief. Actually, she wants to get relief and joy from all these things and wants to run away from dark and dull life at home. Further, she asks the moon to glow, the shining stars to give her shelter with them. She calls all these things her own because she wants some leisure and satisfaction in these natural things. Nature can give delight to her and can transport her to peace and tranquility.

The final stanza, lines 27-30, acknowledges that the woman owns nothing but nature's elements, and even that ownership is figurative rather than literal. Every moment of the woman's life is spent in service to others, and when at last she is done at the end of a long and tiring day, all she has left is the natural world surrounding her: sun, sky, mountain and stone, stars, and moonlight.

These last four stanzas are all about finding comfort and release, stolen moments of peace from the monotonous and never-ending routine of her daily life. Nature is the source of this woman's strength. The idea that the woman speaking is a slave is reinforced in the final line of the poem.

#### **Conclusion**

The poem entitled "Woman Work" written by Maya Angelou was published in August, 12 1978. It tells about woman in that era where feminism appeared and the issue about woman as the subordinate. The issues of woman also adjoin those of exploited environment. It enables some woman writers, including Maya Angelou to produce their literary works dealing with the admiration, protection, and ally of nature. "Woman Work" appertains the historical background at the time, especially the issues that deal with major environmental legislation, most notably the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. Therefore, ecofeminism becomes the important relation to the research.

To be exploited is to work excessively hard for someone else's benefit. The first stanza of this poem explores the theme of exploitation whether the woman is understood to be a slave or simply representative of most women. The list of chores never ends; as soon as she completes the last one, the cycle begins again. She is overworked, exhausted, and weary, but all the effort expended is for someone else's benefit.

The final line of the poem also makes clear that the speaker is a slave. By claiming only nature as her own, she acknowledges her lack of control or ownership over the rest of her life. At the end of a long, back-breaking day,

this woman takes comfort in the sun and the rain, the stars and the moon. They assuage her sadness and soothe her spiritual emptiness. They are all she owns in the world. They are friends of her.

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