

Action and identity: a  
critical analysis of  
"woman work" by  
maya angelou



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Maya Angelou was an acclaimed writer and civil rights activist who reached a broad audience through her works. While she is perhaps best known for her autobiographical prose, her poetry has changed the landscape of feminist writing, bringing in a new idea of the celebration of self-definition and selfhood as an integral part of the attainment of liberation and agency.

Her poem *Woman Work* delineates the life of a woman as being akin to that of a slave. While the idea is latent in most of the poem, her conception becomes quite overt with the mention of picking cotton. Part of the poem reads like a list with a breathless pace, an indication of the tedious life of a woman. The rhyme scheme is not regular, but exists in part of the poem to further accelerate the rhythm of the poem. This pace of the poem is representative of the life of a woman, with the woman having no time to stop; the list of her works seems to go on and on. In the following lines, this idea is especially prominent.

I've got the children to tend  
The clothes to mend  
The floor to mop  
The food to shop  
Then the chicken to fry  
The baby to dry  
I got company to feed  
The garden to weed  
I've got shirts to press  
The tots to dress  
The can to be cut  
I gotta clean up this hut  
Then see about the sick  
And the cotton to pick.

In these lines, the poet delineates the life of a woman. This part of the poem makes it seem like someone is reading it breathlessly. The works of the woman range from her domestic duties, like tending to children and shopping for food, as well as her chores as a slave, like picking cotton. This shows the kind of life that women, specially black women, were forced to lead as they were condemned to live a life in the margins.

The idea of double colonization of the third world woman comes to mind when the reader sees the part about picking cotton. African women were discriminated against on the basis of race as well as gender. They were hence pushed to the very fringes of society, stripped of any voice or agency that the “Others” from different demographics might have.

The pace of the poem then slows down in the next stanza, and a sense of relief is communicated in the following lines:

Shine on me, sunshine  
Rain on me, rain  
Fall softly, dewdrops  
And cool my brow  
again.

Storm, blow me from here  
With your fiercest wind  
Let me float across the  
sky  
Til I can rest again. Fall gently, snowflakes  
Cover me with white  
Cold icy  
kisses and  
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.

The speaker finally seems to find some rest. What is interesting is that it seems like nature is her only escape. Where humankind has doomed her into a life of subservience, nature gives her a catharsis. One of the very significant themes that surfaces in this part of the poem is that of the binary of nature and humankind. Nature doesn't discriminate and provides the only solace the speaker can seem to find.

From this poem, quite a few inferences can be made. It is very clear from the lines of the first stanza that the poet wishes to draw a parallel between the life of a woman and that of a slave. Both having been marginalized in terms of suffering. So often do we forget that there is an intersection between

gender-based and racial prejudice. This poet attempts to expose the reality of living a life when one is marginalized both because of gender as well as race. This woman seems to work at a breathless pace and seems to find no escape from domestic drudgery. She is bound by the dogmas of patriarchy. There is no life for her outside of the domestic life.

However, for a woman like the speaker of the poem, there is a bleak sense of escape in nature. She is able to find some sort of solace and hence, after she has completed her work, she escapes her domestic boundaries into nature.

Thus, the poet does not limit herself to gynocentric concerns and finds the fine line between different types of prejudice. This can be taken as a fierce condemnation of prejudice of every stripe. She delineates the harsh reality of living as the Other, and her critique of the social hierarchy that perpetuates such discrimination and inevitable suffering is evoked in this poem.