

Socialist Feminism in the Select Poems of Maya Angelou

Zoraida A. Cacas¹, Raymark Anthony P. Saluria^{2*}

¹University of San Jose Recoletos, Cebu, Philippines

²Saint Louis School of Don Bosco, Inc., Negros Oriental, Philippines

*Corresponding Author Email: raymarksaluria@slsdb.edu.ph

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Abstract. Maya Angelou is one of the most inspirational African-American poets, novelists, activists, and feminists, who has also been recognized as a prominent and influential voice in literature. This study aimed to engage in an analytical investigation of socialist feminism in the select poems of Maya Angelou using biographical approach and Johanna Brenner's socialist feminism perspective. The select poems included *Woman Work*, *Alone*, *On Working White Liberals*, *When You Come to Me*, *When I Think about Myself* and *Caged Bird*. The research method of textual analysis was used in the literary investigation of the select poems. The study revealed that Maya Angelou had a challenging and colorful life. Her range of experiences from childhood to adulthood had influenced how she wrote. Her vision and legacy as mirrored in her works especially in her poetry continue to inspire others to fight for equality of all forms in the society. It was also found out that there are a number of significant factors that aided in the development of her work as a writer and a poet. Her life experiences along with her education recreated the way she saw the world. The socio-cultural environment in Arkansas during her period also contributed to her profound writings. The salient characteristics of socialist feminism of Brenner such as representation of women, images of women at home and in the workplace and role of women in the society are highly evident in her body of work. As a socialist feminist, Brenner yearns to end the exploitation of women at home, in the workplace, and in the community. Since this research found out that Angelou is regarded a socialist feminist, it is recommended to analyze other types of feminism such as eco-feminism, liberal, and radical feminism to explore other salient characteristics of feminism embedded in Angelou's works.

Keywords: Socialist feminism; Maya Angelou; Biographical approach; Textual analysis.

1.0 Introduction

Literature is life itself. It is one of the most interesting and significant expressions of life depicting its beautiful art that transcends through time. It is the result of the expressions of feelings of the author and his imagination which mirrors a portrait of life. Among the varied modes of discourse, literature is one that elevates man's understanding about life on the level of the symbolic. Man's array of thoughts and emotions and his compendium of attitudes and actuations are often expressed in a language that is all at once beautiful, creative, and memorable but also universally signified through objects and milieu.

Poetry, as quoted by Edgar Allan Poe, one of the greatest American writers of all time, is defined as "the rhythmical creation of beauty in words". It is one of the literary works that has different forms and characteristics. It is the product of human ingenuity that is embedded in the arrangement of words that create meaning. The essential elements of poetry are meter, sounds of words, patterns of rhyme, rhythm and themes that are highly significant in the life of the poet and the life to be conveyed to the readers. A poem can be understood in so many ways, and it highly depends on how the reader views it. Moreover, poetry is "the idea or mind of the poets flowing as a media to express a certain kinds of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts" (Shumanker, 1965). It is a deep-seated

wonder how poets could evoke a sense of persuasion and awaken a sense of vulnerability through their literary works.

Maya Angelou, one of the most inspirational African-American poets, novelists, activists, and feminists, has also been recognized as a prominent and influential voice in the United States. A plethora of her literary pieces especially poems highlight on the discrimination and immense struggle of the African-Americans, racism, and identity issues. With her captivatingly raw experiences and her undeniable connoisseurship of the language of poetry, Maya Angelou employed feminism approach in some of her masterpieces detailing the women's oppression, discrimination, and maltreatment. Some of this poetry largely depicted her seemingly unbearable struggles in life and how she survived and rose above these unfortunate situations.

Maya Angelou wrote and risked rejection and misinterpretation and altered life through her powerfully breathing words. Her body of writings aims to exude experiences into a certain language that is accessible and readable and attempt to capture and reveal the beauty and struggle of her life to continue to inspire not only the African-Americans but everyone who empathize with her story (Todd, 1983).

This study assumed that Maya Angelou's select poems reveal the connections of the life experiences of the poet and the development and refinement of her work. This explains that her fair share of struggles and tumults has ultimately led to better prune and polish her gift of story-telling through her poetry. Moreover, it also argues that socialist feminism is relevant and reflective in some of her works. To prove this assumption, the basic procedures of literary criticism are employed to analyze and criticize the select poems. Underpinning theories of this study are biographical theory of Samuel Johnson and socialist feminism theory by Johanna Brenner.

A biography is a story about the progression of an individual's life which not only consists of a description of the individual's socio-demographic situation and facts about his or her life but also reflects the individual's subjective experience and interpretation of events. Moreover, it pertains to the social reality that affects the course of an individual's life. It relates to those processes and events that a person wishes and is able to tell about, that is, his or her subjective experience and emotions. It is a mirror of the interaction between social development, social changes and processes, prevailing routine and custom, and the individual's experience (Pranka, 2015).

Biographical theory was first coined by Samuel Johnson which dates way back to the Renaissance Period. Johnson is regarded as one of the first theorists to put biographical criticism into great practice. This is based on a central concept that literature is written by real people. In hopes of effectively comprehending the intricacy in the writer's work, there is an immense need to survey the author's range of indispensable experience (Stuart, 1922).

This approach starts with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that comprehending the life of an author can help readers more thoroughly understand the work. Thus, it often affords a practical method by which readers can better understand a text. The biographical critic focuses on elucidating the literary work by employing the meaning provided by knowledge of the author's life (Kennedy & Gioia, 1995).

One method of interpretation which has long been under debate is the method of biographical reading. Biographical criticism as determined by Frank H. Ellis involves "the relation between the written work and the biographical experiences of the writer" (Ellis, 1951). Furthermore, a biographical understanding of the author can help illuminate a reader's understanding of an author's work. The use of biographical approach in examining the author's work allows us to view the expression of deep concern and conflict of the author (Guerin, 1979). Since the premise of biographical criticism maintains that the author and his or her literary work cannot be separated, critics look for glimpses of the author's consciousness or life in the author's work.

This study also considered the socialist feminism theory by Johanna Brenner in attempt to understand the salient components and characteristics of socialist feminism theory reflected in the select poems. Brenner (2014) argues that the entry of women into the labor force and the increasing influence of women trade unionists, the impact of feminism on the perception of women's family roles, and the increasing organization of professionals and grassroots constituencies around family/work issues make it possible for the first time since the emergence of industrial capitalism to challenge women's assignment to unpaid caring work. Socialist feminists reasonably

argue for households' universal need for social provisions that will help them carry out their responsibilities for raising children and caring for adults. Brenner (2014) focuses on the theoretical and strategic questions at the heart of the socialist-feminist project.

Socialist feminists start where most feminists begin that the emancipation of women must come from women ourselves, but cannot be achieved all by themselves (Brenner, 2000). They believe that all women suffer as a result of women's oppression in class society, including under capitalism, and therefore are in favour of uniting all women who want to fight against that oppression under the banner of women's liberation, there is a need to understand that it is working-class women who suffer most acutely: whether it be from the lack of abortion facilities, from sexual harassment or from economic discrimination in the workplace (Graf, 2012). There is a need to understand the inability of nineteenth century feminists to develop solutions adequate to the oppression of women less as a failure of their political imagination or boldness than as a reflection of the state of historical development of capitalism and of male supremacy (DuBois, 1998).

Eisenstein (1979) argues that socialist feminism has a political and intellectual commitment to understanding the problems of women's oppression in terms of a real synthesis between the traditions of Marxist analysis and feminist theory. Furthermore, Ehrenreich (1976) has detailed the three major kinds of evidence of the persistence of sex inequality as occupational segregation by sex; sexual objectification; low representation of women in positions of political leadership.

Socialist feminists asserted that capitalism was by no means the root of maledominance and that new theory was needed to understand its structures and continued reproduction. The distinctive mark of socialist feminism was its view that autonomous structures of gender, race, and class all participated in constructing inequality and exploitation (Gordon, 2013).

Socialist feminism, while centered around the question of gender constitution and oppression, sees history in the materialist tradition. Socialist feminist analysis thus focuses on the institutions and social practices as these affect women, and attempts to understand the relations of gender and class in the course of social change (Kuhn & Wolpe, 1978). Socialist feminism involves a commitment to "the practical unity of the struggle against capitalism and the struggle for women's liberation" (Young, 2005).

In summary, the three notable characteristics of socialist feminism revolve around the representation of women in general, image of women at work and the division of labor and the role of women in the society.

The researchers aimed to analyze her select poems through the biographical lens. This study sought to recognize the relationship between the author's life and her profound work as reflected from her masterful and provoking poems. Moreover, this also hoped to unravel how she shedded light on socialist feminism and how she empowered women effectively as evident from her body of work.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This literary investigation of the select poems used the research method of textual analysis. The purpose of textual analysis is to describe the content, structure and functions of the messages contained in the text. It involves close reading which would lead to unit-by-unit and ended up by whole-textual reading. This textual analysis was undertaken towards biographical criticism retrieval of literariness of the text. This verbal analytical discussion was based on logical statements describing the connections between the poet and the text. Hence, statistical quantification was not needed as it was focused on descriptive analysis of the subject.

2.2 Research Participants

The study did not employ research participants since it involved analysis of texts only.

2.3 Research Instruments

The main sources of data of this study were taken from the select poems by Maya Angelou, whereas, the theoretical data sourced out were internet theses and journals, books, and descriptions that support the study.

Syntheses of meanings were generated logically and verbally utilizing the biographical theory of Samuel Johnson and social feminism theory by Johanna Brenner.

2.4 Data-Gathering Procedures

The data of this study were taken from Maya Angelou's poems. In collecting the data, the researchers read and comprehended Maya Angelou's poems namely *Woman Work*, *Alone*, *On Working White Liberals*, *When You Come to Me*, *When I Think about Myself* and *Caged Bird*. The researchers noted marks on every part of the poem relevant to the problem of the study and categorized the data based on the problem of the study. The process of generating the analytical verbal data followed three phases: *Phase One: The Biography of Maya Angelou* where it presents the life, education, and socio-cultural environment of Maya Angelou across the different stages of her life; *Phase Two. The Biographical Analysis of Maya Angelou's Select Poems* where it focused on the biographical background of Maya Angelou's select poems; and *Phase Three: The Socialist Feminism Reflected in the Select Poems* where it focused on the salient characteristics of socialist feminism reflected in the select poems of Maya Angelou. The poetic lines from the poems were dissected and analyzed as to how the life, education and/or socio-cultural environment of Maya Angelou were reflected in the lines. Afterwards, how the text structured gender ideologies to support the social stature of the poet was drawn out.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The researchers manifested the necessary ethical consideration during the conduct of the study. Proper citations and attributions were provided to ensure respect of intellectual property. Furthermore, all in-text citations were reflected in the references.

3.0 Results and Discussions

3.1 The Biography of Maya Angelou

The first phase of this analysis was to examine the biography of the poet. This included the different significant life experiences of her life, her education and socio-cultural environment.

Table 1. The biography of Maya Angelou

Stages in Life	Significant Life Experiences	Education	Socio-Cultural Environment
Childhood	-Real name is Marguerite Annie Johnson. -Born on April 4, 1928 at St. Louis, Missouri, United States. -Separation of parents at three years old -Raped by her mother's boyfriend at eight years old -Spent years as a virtual mute in Arkansas -Recovery from being virtual mute	-Development of her love for books and literature with the help of her teacher, Bertha Flowers -Discovery of the world around her	-Harsh economy among African American -Crash of stock market in 1929 -Drought and devastation of crops and farmlands in Arkansas
Adolescence	-Moved in with her mother at fourteen -Gave birth to her son at sixteen -Worked as the first black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco. -Worked a number of jobs to support herself and her son	-Studied in George Washington High School -Won a scholarship to study dance -Completed her studies at the California Labor School	-Onset of World War II. -Fundamental social and economic changes in Arkansas
Adulthood	-Married Tosh Angelos and got separated in 1954 -Married to Vusumzi Make unofficially and separated in 1962 -Married Paul du Feu in 1974 and got divorced in 1983 -Danced professionally in clubs around San Francisco -Worked as a market researcher in Watts -Appeared off-Broadway in Calypso Heat Wave and released her first album Miss Calypso -Became member of the Harlem Writers Guild -Organized and starred in the musical revue Cabaret -Served as the SCLC's northern coordinator -Lived in Egypt and Ghana -Held a position at the University of Ghana -Angelou was recognized for remaining on The New York Times' paperback nonfiction best-seller list for two years -Authored the critically acclaimed I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings	-Took modern dance classes	-Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Table 1 presents the biography of Maya Angelou. Her biography is divided into three stages: Childhood; Adolescence; and Adulthood life. In each stage of her life, the following biographical components were discussed: significant life experiences; education; and socio-cultural environment.

Childhood Stage

Significant Life Experiences. As shown in Table 1, Angelou's real name is Marguerite Annie Johnson. As an African American, she was born on April 4, 1928 at St. Louis, Missouri, United States of America. At the age of three, she was a victim of a broken family. This was brought about by the separation of her parents. As a child, Angelou experienced violence. At the age of eight, she was raped by her mother's boyfriend. The event made her a virtual mute.

Education. The third column of Table 1 presents that Angelou developed her love for books and literature in school. Miss Bertha Flowers played a significant role in her learning. Moreover, Angelou spoke again. She became widely aware of the world around her.

Socio-Cultural Environment. Column 4 in Table 1 shows the socio-cultural environment during Angelou's childhood life. History tells that Arkansas is experiencing harsh economy in the late 1920's. There is a crash of the stock market of America in 1929. A year after, 1930, a great drought devastated the crops and farmlands of Arkansas. African American in Arkansas experience economic difficulty (Whayne et al., 2013).

Adolescence

Significant Life Experiences. As shown in the second row of Table 1, at fourteen, she and her brother moved in with their mother once again. At sixteen, she gave birth to her son, Guy. She worked as the first black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Also, she worked in a number of jobs to support herself and her son.

Education. The third column of the table also presents that Angelou studied in George Washington High School but did not finish there. As a matter of fact, she won a scholarship to study dance and acting at the Labor School. She attended and completed her studies at the California Labor School.

Socio-Cultural Environment. As presented in the fourth column, it was the onset of World War II where Arkansas underwent fundamental social and economic changes that affected all parts of the state. Families in Arkansas had to endure the worry and fear of sending family members off to war while at the same time struggling with the many changes taking place on the home front (Whayne et al., 2013).

Adulthood

Significant Life Experiences. The last row of Table 1 shows significant life experiences of Angelou as an adult. In 1951, Angelou married Tosh Angelos and got separated in 1954. Her second marriage with Vusumzi Make in 1961 was unofficial and then got separated in 1962. Then, she was married to Paul du Feu in 1974 and they got divorced in 1983. She danced professionally in clubs around San Francisco which was how she earned money to sustain herself and her children. She worked as a market researcher in Watts and had witnessed the riots in the summer of 1965.

Angelou appeared off-Broadway in Calypso Heat Wave and released her first album Miss Calypso. In 1960, she became a member of the Harlem Writers Guild. After, she organized and starred in the musical revue Cabaret for Freedom as a benefit for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She served as the SCLC's northern coordinator. In the 1960s, she spent most of her time living in Egypt and Ghana. She held a position at the University of Ghana for a time. In 1995, Angelou was recognized for remaining on The New York Times' paperback nonfiction best-seller list for two years - the longest-running record in the chart's history. She authored the critically acclaimed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Education. Table 1 also shows that during her adult life, she took modern dance classes to improve her skills in dancing. She was able to benefit from these skills when she worked in clubs as professional dancer.

Socio-Cultural Environment. As reflected in Table, 1, in 1968, Martin Luther King Jr., a black American activist, was assassinated. He considered him as one of her heroes. This led her to fight for the rights of the black people.

In 1960, Maya Angelou accepted the position of northern coordinator of the New York office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) for only six months. It was this time when Angelou met Martin Luther King. On the other hand, he was thankful to her for her contributions in several fundraising ventures. After hearing King speak at a church in Harlem in early 1960, Angelou resolved to help the SCLC raise funds by staging a show entitled *Cabaret for Freedom* which was an utter success (Angelou, 1981).

Angelou (1981) posited in a letter, "I join with millions of black people the world over in saying 'You are our leader'". From then on, Maya made it a legacy to continue fighting for equality no matter the color or race, the same cause of Martin Luther King.

In summary, the biography of Maya Angelou shows that her life experiences, education, and the socio-cultural environment have a great influence on the themes of her writings. Her select poems namely *Woman Work*, *Alone*, *On Working White Liberals*, *When You Come to Me*, *When I Think about Myself* and *Caged Bird* were analyzed in the perspective of her biography.

3.2 The Biographical Analysis of Maya Angelou's Select Poems

This part of the paper focused on the biographical analysis of Maya Angelou's select poems. The poems were examined and analysed in relation to the significant stages of the life of the writer as well as her education and socio-cultural environment.

Table 2. The biographical analysis of the select poems of Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou's Select Poems	Stages of Life	Education	Socio-Cultural Environment
When You Come To Me	Lines 1 – 4 Reminiscence of painful childhood		Lines 1 – 4 Story of unnoticed oppression and exploitation
Caged Bird	Lines 15 – 22 Tragic experiences		Lines 1 – 14 Outright evidence of slavery and inequality
Alone	Lines 7 – 10 Troubled adolescence of a single mother	Lines 11 – 13 Education of the realities of life	Lines 3 – 5 An economic struggle in their place
When I Think about Myself	Lines 8 – 10 Working for the white people	Lines 8 – 9 Working and attending school at the same time	Lines 17 – 21 A racial prejudice or discrimination during her period in Arkansas
Woman Work	Lines 1 – 14 Juggling into many professions for survival	Lines 20 -23 Learned from her plethora of experiences	Lines 1 – 14 Women stereotypes
On Working White Liberals	Lines 10 – 12 Her legacy to fight the rights of the black people		Lines 7 – 9 White supremacy and inequality in the society

Table 2 discusses the different stages of Maya Angelou's life, education and socio-cultural environment as reflected in her select poems. Selected lines from each of the six poems are drawn out and analysed vis-à-vis the three components.

Stages of Life

The poem *When You Come to Me* tells the painful childhood memories of the author. These are expressed in the following lines:

- 1 "When you come to me, unbidden,
- 2 Beckoning me
- 3 To long-ago rooms,
- 4 Where memories lie."

The words on the first line, especially “when you come to me, unbidden” signify something which has come uninvited. This uninvited guest might be a thought arising from the consciousness of the person without exerting any effort. The referral of “you” in Line 1 could be a representation of a traumatic event that happened to her that influenced how she saw the world she was living in. This kept on haunting her even if she did not seek for it. The unbidden thought is being qualified by the succeeding three lines that tell, “Beckoning me to long-ago rooms where memories lie.” “Long-ago rooms” can be signification of a person’s past experiences that are not consoling. The biography of Maya Angelou tells that one of her significant childhood life experiences is the sexual violence at the age of eight (Egan, 2009).

The poem seems to be a reminiscence of that traumatic incident that happened to her. In the poem, she seems talking about losing something that she valued greatly in her life. This could be her femininity which was taken away from her. She was young and innocent at that time impartially oblivious of what was going on. The innocence of her childhood stripped bare. Her sense of the world she lived in rushed into the light. There are images in the poem that speak of the emotional weight being carried on by Angelou on her shoulders. This could be the feeling of worthlessness after being sexually maltreated. The poem explores her inner struggle of redemption after a stormy childhood (Kite, 2006).

On the other hand, the poem *Caged Bird* tells of a caged bird whose feet are tied and wings clipped, placed in a cage that prevents it from flying away. Lines 16 and 17 “With a fearful trill of things unknown” speak of the persona’s unfortunate state. The succeeding lines describe the plight of a misused, captured creature. Despite the fear, it “sings of freedom” as evident in Line 22. This describes how she was imprisoned by the tragic experiences that happened to her where she felt hopeless and helpless. These feelings are reflected in these verses:

15 *“The caged bird sings*
 16 *with a fearful trill*
 17 *of things unknown*
 18 *but longed for still*
 19 *and his tune is heard*
 20 *on the distant hill*
 21 *for the caged bird*
 22 *sings of freedom.”*

The poem *Alone* resembles of the traumatic childhood and troubled adolescence of Maya Angelou. In order to survive life’s trials, she needed to toughen herself and continue to strive.

7 *“And I don't believe I'm wrong*
 8 *That nobody,*
 9 *But nobody*
 10 *Can make it out here alone.”*

Her self-imposed muteness explained how she wanted to deal with her trauma all by herself. Her traumatic childhood and troubled adolescence were unimaginable as they were imprinted largely in her mind and heart. She had to bear everything all by herself. She even had to sacrifice her own happiness (Angelou, 1981).

The poem *When I Think about Myself* has a very close reference to Maya Angelou. Racism had been an issue Angelou was fighting for all her life. As an African American, Angelou experienced first-hand racial prejudices and discrimination in Arkansas. She also suffered at the hands of a family associate around the age of seven (Angelou, 1981).

8 *“Sixty years in these folks' world*
 9 *The child I works for calls me girl*
 10 *I say “Yes ma'am” for working's sake.”*

As evident from the poem especially on the first line, her parents were working hard for the white people but only got the waste of the fruit of their labor. Line 9 shows she was a child during that time. This may be an indirect

effect of racism. Sometimes, in pondering how cruel and inhumane the world is, she had to deal with it in the best way possible by existing in it for there was no other escape.

The poem *Woman Work* could be a perfect reflection of who Maya Angelou was. She was a woman of many professions. She had to juggle into many a countless profession just to survive and feed her child.

- 1 *"I've got the children to tend*
- 2 *The clothes to mend*
- 3 *The floor to mop*
- 4 *The food to shop*
- 5 *Then the chicken to fry*
- 6 *The baby to dry*
- 7 *I got company to feed*
- 8 *The garden to weed*
- 9 *I've got shirts to press*
- 10 *The tots to dress*
- 11 *The can to be cut*
- 12 *I gotta clean up this hut*
- 13 *Then see about the sick*
- 14 *And the cotton to pick."*

It can be inferred from the lines that she is a mother as reflected in Lines 1 and 6, a housekeeper in Line 2 to 3 and 9-10, a cook in Lines 4 to 7, hostess, gardener as reflected in Line 8, and the list goes on.

In the poem, the readers are given the strong impression of an exhausted woman, aged beyond her physical years, while dealing with a tough life and situation within the borders of her slaver's home and business. The woman in the title may refer entirely to Angelou considering her range of experiences. The intricacy of the building up of emotions reflected in the poem speaks highly of the personal touch that the author put on the poem. Angelou greatly learned from her plethora of experiences which she incorporated in her poetry.

In her biography, as a young adult, she juggled into different professions such as a waitress, cook, dancer, singer, actress, performer, prostitute, writer, poet screenplay writer, producer, teacher, newspaper editor among others just to sustain her son (Angelou, 1981). The poem *On Working White Liberals* is a reminder of Angelou's fight against white supremacy as reflected in these lines,

- 10 *"This rocky road is not paved for us,*
- 11 *So, I'll believe in Liberals' aid for us*
- 12 *When I see a white man load a Black man's gun."*

The line, "This rocky road is not paved for us", may mean that there could never be the possibility of two races to unite. This is further illustrated in a condition set by the speaker when he said that "So, I'll believe in Liberals' aid for us when I see a white man load a Black man's gun" as shown in Lines 11 and 12.

It has been one of her legacies to stand up against the issue on white liberalism which was unfortunately popular and evident during her time. As a matter of fact, many of her poems are very personal in nature. The themes of racism, women's power and liberation including women's sexual and romantic experiences are also evident (DeGout, 2009).

As an author, she had gained consciousness to be a civil activist fighting for the freedom of the black people believing there should be equality in this nation. He was inspired by Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders. Angelou emphasized the need for them to be respected and heard.

Education

Almost implicitly, some of the lines in the selected poems of Angelou may speak of her education in relation to the significant experiences that occurred in her life.

Having a traumatic childhood, she imposed self-muteness to herself. This period of silence taught her to listen and observe the world around her developing her love for reading and literature until her teacher helped her slowly overcome this muteness. After a period of silence, she began to speak again. However, she had to experience another challenge when she worked and attended school at the same time. The following lines from the poem *"When I Think about Myself"* justify the earlier statement:

8 *"Sixty years in these folks' world*
9 *The child I works for calls me girl"*

During her high school, her education was rather troubled because of an unwanted pregnancy. She was still very innocent but she had to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders. The following lines from the poem *Alone* explain how being a mother at a very young age opened her mind to the realities of life as reflected in Lines 11-13:

11 *"Alone, all alone*
12 *Nobody, but nobody*
13 *Can make it out here alone."*

The poem *Woman Work* shows that Angelou greatly learned from the hurdles and plethora of life experiences she experienced. She used these as inspirations in creating her poems, autobiographies and other literary works. Her exquisite gift in writing has been instrumental in inspiring the readers to face every circumstance that life offers as mentioned in these lines:

20 *"Storm, blow me from here*
21 *With your fiercest wind*
22 *Let me float across the sky*
23 *'Til I can rest again."*

Her writings mirror her life experiences that intend to portray the author's quest for her selfhood, her physical and spiritual identities. She dealt with domestic issues and finished with universal questions, such as race, cultural differences and femininity, further on contemplating on Angelou's place as a black female in a patriarchal white man's world. Her poems do not only manifest control as a whole, but also feminist psyche in control of femininity, while embodying woman on three different levels: racial, biographical and universal (Ghani & Naz, 2007).

Socio-Cultural Environment

The poem *When You Come to Me* as discussed in the previous paragraphs may be a representation of a sexual exploitation that happened to others. The rape incident that happened to Angelou may be one of the different stories of women oppression and exploitation that were told but went unnoticed. Because of how women were treated, these might be a causal factor why similar stories such these were kept or perhaps buried to the ground.

In the poem *Caged Bird*, somehow, it is an outright reflection of slavery and negritude and how the black people struggle with these issues which she experienced first-hand. The following verses speak of these:

1 *"A free bird leaps*
2 *on the back of the wind*
3 *and floats downstream*
4 *till the current ends*
5 *and dips his wing*
6 *in the orange sun rays*
7 *and dares to claim the sky.*
8 *But a bird that stalks*
9 *down his narrow cage*
10 *can seldom see through*
11 *his bars of rage*

12 *his wings are clipped and*
13 *his feet are tied*
14 *so he opens his throat to sing."*

The images of a free bird and caged bird set the difference between a slave and a free man. Lines 1-7 show a picture of a free bird "that floats downstream", "dips his wing in the orange sun rays" and "dares to claim the sky" while Lines 8-14 depict an image of a caged bird that "stalks down his narrow cage", "his wings are clipped" and "his feet are tied". The differences implicitly explain the free men and the slaves. During her time, slavery is an issue that people keep on fighting against.

The poem *Alone* paints a picture of an economic struggle in Arkansas as reflected in these lines:

3 *"How to find my soul a home*
4 *Where water is not thirsty*
5 *And bread loaf is not stone"*

The images of "water" and "bread" are symbols of the drought that hit the Arkansas destroying the crops and their farmland (Whayne et al., 2013). If taken literally, the line "How to find my soul a home" may be speaking of the emotional struggle she faced having to live with her family in an unfortunate and underprivileged life.

In the poem *When I Think about Myself*, it was evident there was racial prejudice or discrimination during her period in Arkansas. Racism was rampant. Black people had the image of being slaves. These lines prove this:

17 *The tales they tell, sound just like lying,*
18 *They grow the fruit,*
19 *But eat the rind,*
20 *I laugh until I start to crying,*
21 *When I think about my folks.*

During the World War II, oftentimes, women are viewed as incapable of doing great things. Gender inequality and stereotypes were evident. This reality is somehow reflected in the poem *Woman Work*:

1 *"I've got the children to tend*
2 *The clothes to mend*
3 *The floor to mop*
4 *The food to shop*
5 *Then the chicken to fry*
6 *The baby to dry*
7 *I got company to feed*
8 *The garden to weed*
9 *I've got shirts to press*
10 *The tots to dress*
11 *The can to be cut*
12 *I gotta clean up this hut*
13 *Then see about the sick*
14 *And the cotton to pick."*

During her time, white supremacy was an issue. White peoples reigned over blacks. This was brought about by inequality in the society.

7 *"I'm afraid they'll have to prove first*
8 *That they'll watch the Black man move first*
9 *Then follow him with faith to kingdom come."*

In summary, Angelou's life experiences, her education and the socio-cultural environment are largely mirrored in her poetry. Praseedha (2010) affirms that her life experiences paved way for the development of her works as an author and as a poet. Moreover, the significant events that happened during her period in Arkansas were instrumental in developing some of her works as a poet.

3.3 The Socialist Feminism Reflected in the Select Poems

This part of the paper discusses the characteristics of socialist feminism reflected in the select poem and how socialist feminists view such characteristics. Each poem will be discussed vis-à-vis the three salient characteristics namely representation of women, images of women at home and in the workplace and role of women in the society. Different lines from the poem will be drawn out and analyzed whether these validate or invalidate the aforementioned characteristics.

Table 3. The socialist feminism of Johanna Brenner reflected in the select poems of Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou's Select Poems	Representation of Women (Empowerment of Women)	Images of Women		Role of Women in the Society (Women Liberation)	Significant Findings Reflected in Brenner's Socialist Feminism
		Home (Welfare of Women)	Workplace (Economic Independence)		
When You Come To Me	Lines 1 – 14 Representation of women as weaker sex	Lines 1 – 14 Women being left in the house	Lines 20 – 23 Unequal standing of both sexes at work	Lines 1 – 14 Women live in a society with observed gender inequality Lines 7 – 10 Co-existence of men and women	In general, wives are economically dependent and disempowered. Brenner's perspective focuses on ending the exploitation of women at home, in the workplace, and in the community. Socialist feminists start where most feminists begin that the emancipation of women must come from women ourselves, but cannot be achieved all by themselves. Brenner believes in the complementation of men and women.
Caged Bird	Lines 7 – 10 Women compliment men				Socialist feminists share liberal feminism's commitment to individual rights and equal opportunity. Brenner hopes to address the problems of working women, ease their burden and improve women's and especially mothers' position on the labor market.
Alone	Lines 1 – 3 Liberalization and discrimination of women		Lines 4 – 6 Exploitation of women at work	Lines 7 – 12 Promotion of equal respect and footing no matter the color, race or gender	Social feminists believe in the power of the state to assist the situation of women as they entered the market economy.
When I Think about Myself	Lines 5 – 9 Women as vulnerable beings and objects that can be infantilized		Line 10 Limiting the physical work that women can do	Lines 5-9 Women as more capable than what the society's standards set	
Woman Work	Lines 8 – 12 Undervaluing and oppression of women		Lines 8 – 12 Women being at a disadvantage at work	Lines 17 – 21 Existence of social inequality or oppression	Social feminists agree that women have been oppressed in virtually all known societies and their different relations to productive work, reproduction, socialization of children and sexuality in patriarchy give her lesser economic and psychological power in relation to men.
On Working White Liberals	Lines 27 – 30 Women being weak and vulnerable	Lines 8 – 14 Women are not free to do what they want		Lines 15 – 22 Rights of women	Socialist feminists emphasize that within the workplace women face challenges of job market segregation, lower wages for the same work, and sexual harassment.

Woman Work

Representation of Women in the Society. As presented on the first column, the poem *Woman Work* explains how women are represented as the weaker sex. This gender inequality or stereotyping is evident where women are viewed as only good for household works and that they are not capable of doing great things. These household women remain to be awfully busy with the domestic chores as reflected in the following poetic lines:

1 *"I've got the children to tend*
 2 *The clothes to mend*
 3 *The floor to mop*
 4 *The food to shop*
 5 *Then the chicken to fry*
 6 *The baby to dry*
 7 *I got company to feed*
 8 *The garden to weed*
 9 *I've got shirts to press*
 10 *The tots to dress*
 11 *The can to be cut*
 12 *I gotta clean up this hut*
 13 *Then see about the sick*
 14 *And the cotton to pick."*

Because of these stereotypes, women are regarded as the "weaker sex". In reality, women can do much more than society decides. They can excel in other fields or disciplines. Brenner (2014) convincingly documents the inconsistency of gender identity in the face of the powerful forces. With these, women struggle for independence.

Images of Women at Home and in the Workplace. In the same lines of the aforementioned poem, they explain how women are left in the house tending the children, doing household chores. The poem listlessly enumerates everyday habits of a housewife to prove her point. She has to mop the floor. She has to clean the house. She has to bathe and dry the kids. She has to prepare the children for school. She has to buy food. She has to cook for her family. She has to weed the garden. She is fed up with this boring life. She has no source to enjoy life.

Since the poem looks at the idea of women being overwhelmed by housework with no time for themselves, it presents an argument often made by socialist feminists stating that women are often used as an unpaid laborer at home, alienated from themselves. The speaker's desire for freedom indicates her need to be valued for her work, the need to be acknowledged for her contribution.

This adheres very much to the concern of socialist feminists as it presents gender inequality. There is unequal standing of both sexes in work. Women are left in the house tending the children, doing household chores while men are perceived to be the ones responsible in earning for the family.

Brenner (2014) implies that socialist feminists reasonably argue for households' universal need for social provisions that will help them carry out their responsibilities for raising children and caring for adults. This speaks of the significant role of the welfare of women in general which the socialist feminist perspective continues to promote. In the workplace, women are economically dependent and disempowered as evident in Angelou's poetry. This becomes one of the causes of socialist feminism which is to put a stop to the exploitation of women at home and in the workplace.

Role of Women in the Society. Lines 1-14 as mentioned above explain that the stature of women in the society is a vivid representation of how women are not fared equal with men. Women are regarded to live a boring and monotonous life making the sacrifices for their children. Having lived in a society with observed gender inequality, women experience exploitations in the community. With this, Brenner believes that this prejudice or bias has to be eliminated in the community so that women can obtain liberation and freedom and act accordingly.

Alone

Representation of Women in the Society. As shown on the second column, Lines 6-10 of the poem *Alone* explains that women compliment men and that both sexes are created equal. It also explains the coexistence of man and woman, that each sex is dependent on another. Both must strive to exist for the world we live to continue revolving. Nobody makes it alone in this world. This is somehow relevant to the maxim that states, "No man is an island but a part of a whole". Sometimes, no one can survive with only him in the world. We are all a part of something. A man needs a woman for a reason; a woman lives with a man. We are intertwined with one another as reflected in these lines:

7 *"And I don't believe I'm wrong*
 8 *That nobody,*
 9 *But nobody*
 10 *Can make it out here alone."*

Moreover, the persona seems to have something important to say about the state of society and the suffering of the human race. It calls for togetherness and that, humans souls have to work together for the common good of all. As humans, we are social animals. We, people, need people.

Role of Women in the Society. The poem *Alone* explicates the necessity of a woman for the society or the world to exist. This socialist feminists' perspective explains the role of women in the society. This poem continues to inspire those who want to live in a world where equality, justice, and transparency apply to all, regardless of skin, creed or sexual orientation. Social feminists argue that the society continues to exist because of men and women alike. Women are regarded as equally important as men. Moreover, socialist feminists start where most feminists begin that the emancipation of women must come from women ourselves, but cannot be achieved all by themselves (Brenner, 2014). This perspective of Brenner explains the complementation of men and women as a major characteristic of feminism.

On Working White Liberals

Representation of Women in the Society. The poem *On Working White Liberals* implicates how women are discriminated and liberalized. They are perceived as helpless and hopeless. In this poem, the poet pleads for something as explicated in these lines:

1 *"I don't ask the Foreign Legion*
 2 *Or anyone to win my freedom*
 3 *Or to fight my battle better than I can"*

Socialist feminists believe that all women suffer as a result of women's oppression in class society, including under capitalism, and therefore are in favour of uniting all women who want to fight against that oppression under the banner of women's liberation, there is a need to understand that it is working-class women who suffer most acutely: whether it be from the lack of abortion facilities, from sexual harassment or from economic discrimination in the workplace (Graf, 2012). This discrimination of women shows a form of women disempowerment. This concerns Brenner's perspective that individual rights and equal opportunity should be offered to all (2014).

Images of Women at Home and in the Workplace. Table 2 presents that Lines 4 – 6 of the poem *On Working White Liberals* speak about how women are exploited at work and that, there is unequal division of labor.

4 *"Though there's one thing that I cry for*
 5 *I believe enough to die for*
 6 *That is every man's responsibility to man."*

Brenner (2014) asserts that social feminists look to an expansive and activist state to address the problems of working women, to ease the burden of the double day, to improve women's and especially mothers' position on the labor market, to provide public services that socialize the labor of care and to expand social responsibility for care.

Role of Women in the Society. The poem *On Working White Liberals* somehow does not only talk about supremacy or superiority in terms of color but also race. Black women are regarded as inferior to white women. This perception can be traced back in the history of our world. Moreover, the poem recreates another tale of racial or women discrimination as reflected in these lines:

7 *"I'm afraid they'll have to prove first*
 8 *That they'll watch the Black man move first*
 9 *Then follow him with faith to kingdom come.*
 10 *This rocky road is not paved for us,*
 11 *So, I'll believe in Liberals' aid for us*

Socialist feminists promote equal respect and footing no matter the color, race or gender. According to Brenner (2014), socialist feminists share liberal feminism's commitment to individual rights and equal opportunity. These two ideas and causes of Angelou and Brenner are perfectly in sync. While it is true that both of them clamor for the same causes, this reality takes time to accomplish or achieve.

When You Come to Me

Representation of Women in the Society. The poem *When You Come to Me* reminded Angelou of the past that kept on haunting her and creeping up on her time and again. This could be anything that affected how she lived in the society. Women by nature are vulnerable to pain. They are capable of feeling hurt and pain.

The aforementioned poem tells of a woman being exploited because of her vulnerability. This highly speaks of social feminism as women are seen as objects who can be infantilized and hurt.

5 "Offering me, as to a child, an attic,
6 Gatherings of days too few.
7 Baubles of stolen kisses.
8 Trinkets of borrowed loves.
9 Trunks of secret words,
10 I CRY."

Women are seen as vulnerable beings and perceived as objects that can be infantilized and hurt. Femininity is always associated with weaknesses and frailties. Since women are emotional more than logical, they easily feel disempowered.

Images of Women at Home and in the Workplace. At work, women are limited with the physical activities that they can do. Taking care of babies and small children, as a type of work done overwhelmingly by women, socializes women and men to have different identities, personalities and skills. In the modern times, this is very evident as women are more perceived to be in office work or any job that requires a limited physical work. With this, social feminists believe in the power of the state to assist the situation of women as they entered the market economy (Brenner, 2014).

Role of Women in the Society. These women stereotypes continue to be largely affecting how society sees the women. Socialist feminists believe that women are more capable than what the society's standards set.

When I Think about Myself

Representation of Women in the Society. The poem *When I Think about Myself* may talk about social injustice or inequality in the society where Maya Angelou thrived. Women are undervalued. This poses a tremendous burden on the part of the women and they could only hold for too long and may begin cracking anytime soon. Moreover, the poem sheds light on social inequality or oppression, a very clear socialist feminism perspective. However, this also talks about pride and survival. Similar with her other poems, she narrated the placement and displacement of the author as a southern black girl and establishes that her range of experiences of racial discrimination, rape, and numerous other oppressions did not deter her; on the contrary, they encouraged and reinforced her, thus committing her to survival at all costs.

8 "Sixty years in these folks' world
9 The child I works for calls me girl
10 I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake.
11 Too proud to bend
12 Too poor to break,
13 I laugh until my stomach ache,
14 When I think about myself."

According to Hochschild (1979) as cited in Graf (2012), social feminists also agree that women have been oppressed in virtually all known societies, but the nature of this oppression has differed because of the different economic realities.

Images of Women at Home and in the Workplace. In the same aforementioned lines, women are undervalued or oppressed. Moreover, women are at a disadvantage at work as they are paid less. According to Mitchell (1972), women's different relations to productive work, reproduction, socialization of children and sexuality in patriarchy give her lesser economic and psychological power in relation to men. Brenner (2014), as mentioned above, highlights that social feminists believed in the power of the state to assist the situation of women as they entered the market economy. However, this challenge cannot be organized by feminists alone, nor with old forms of feminist organization. It requires a broad and militant mobilization from below incorporating movements for democratic rights that are far more inclusive, new more social and political forms of trade-union struggle.

Role of Women in the Society. Socialist feminists believe in the existence of social inequality or oppression as reflected in these lines:

17 *The tales they tell, sound just like lying,*
18 *They grow the fruit,*
19 *But eat the rind,*
20 *I laugh until I start to crying,*
21 *When I think about my folks.*

According to Hochschild (1979) as cited in Graf (2012), gender inequality in society is connected to unpaid domestic labor. Women do twice the domestic labor of men. Socialist feminists push for the recognition and respect of all work in society (Graf, 2012).

Caged Bird

Representation of Women in the Society. The poem *Caged Bird* clearly shows how women are perceived and represented in the society. They are considered as weak and vulnerable. They can be controlled and manipulated as found in these lines:

27 *"But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams*
28 *his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream*
29 *his wings are clipped and his feet are tied*
30 *so he opens his throat to sing."*

Line 27 describes a caged bird who "stands on the grave of dreams" which may be a reflection of how fate favors to few people. The bird's "wings are clipped" and "feet are tied" as elucidated in Line 29. These powerful images may refer to women who do not have the freedom to do what they want. The unfairness of life makes them highly vulnerable.

Images of Women at Home and in the Workplace. The poem *Caged Bird* also posits that women are not free to do what they want. They are limited with their activities.

8 *"But a bird that stalks*
9 *down his narrow cage*
10 *can seldom see through*
11 *his bars of rage*
12 *his wings are clipped and*
13 *his feet are tied*
14 *so he opens his throat to sing."*

As interpreted in the previous paragraphs, women may be controlled with their lives. Just like the caged bird, they are being watched and observed making their actions rehearsed. According to Hochschild (1979) as cited in

Graf (2012), socialist feminists emphasize that within the workplace women face challenges of job market segregation, lower wages for the same work, and sexual harassment (Graf, 2012).

Role of Women in the Society. Socialist feminists believe in the rights of the women.

15 *"The caged bird sings*
16 *with a fearful trill*
17 *of things unknown*
18 *but longed for still*
19 *and his tune is heard*
20 *on the distant hill*
21 *for the caged bird*
22 *sings of freedom."*

Socialist feminists start where most feminists begin that the emancipation of women must come from women ourselves, but cannot be achieved all by themselves (Jenner, 2014).

In summary, Maya Angelou has reflected the social feminism in some of her poetry. She continues to primarily fight for gender equality specifically the rights of women. She promotes equal respect and footing no matter the color, race or gender. The salient characteristics of Johanna Brenner's socialist feminism which include representation of women, images of women at home and in the workplace and the role of women in the society are mirrored in Angelou's works. Specifically, Angelou clamored for similar feminist perspectives that Brenner posits such as empowerment of women, women liberation and welfare reform or economic independence.

4.0 Conclusion

In view of the analyses and findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn out:

- a.) Maya Angelou had a challenging and colorful life. Her range of experiences from childhood to adulthood had influenced how she wrote. Her vision and legacy as mirrored in her works especially in her poetry continue to inspire others to fight for equality of all forms in the society.
- b.) There are a number of significant factors that aided in the development of her work as a writer and a poet. Her life experiences along with her education recreated the way she saw the world. The socio-cultural environment in Arkansas during her period also contributed to her profound writings.
- c.) Angelou embodies a woman who continues to wage war against gender inequality, discrimination, racial prejudice and other imminent issues in the society. Her works explicitly and implicitly describe how these issues rampantly create imbalance and division in the society. The salient characteristics of socialist feminism of Brenner such as representation of women, images of women at home and in the workplace and role of women in the society are highly evident in her body of work. As a socialist feminist, Brenner yearns to end the exploitation of women at home, in the workplace, and in the community having known that women have been oppressed in virtually all known societies. All these cause of Brenner coincide with what Angelou portrayed in her poetry.
- d.) This research work concludes that Angelou's select poems reveal the connections of the significant life experiences of the poet, her education and the socio-cultural environment. These factors are indispensable in the development and refinement of her work. Moreover, the socialist feminist perspective is relevant and reflective in the select poems studied and analyzed in this research.
- e.) Based on the findings of this study, both Maya Angelou and Johanna Brenner clamor or cry for the same socialist feminist perspectives. Since wives are economically dependent and disempowered as reflective of Angelou's poetry, Brenner hopes to end the exploitation and oppression of women at home, in the workplace, and in the community and commit to individual rights and equal opportunity for all. While Angelou has portrayed in her poetry that women face challenges with regard to how they are represented, how they are viewed at home and in the workplace and how they perform their roles in the society, Brenner also hopes to address the problems of working women, ease their burden and improve women's and especially mothers' position on the labor market.

- f.) Since the biography of the poet reflects his body of work, it is recommended that teachers and students alike should study and analyze the biography of the writer before attempting to discuss the literary piece. This will provide them noteworthy information on how to further analyze the piece.
- g.) It is recommended that the aside from the life experiences of the author, the education should also be taken into consideration because it may have an effect on the poet's works. Moreover, the socio-cultural environment of the author should also be taken into account because this would somehow shape the author's treatment of his works.
- h.) Since this research found out that Maya Angelou is regarded a socialist feminist, it is recommended to future writers or authors to attempt to analyze other types of feminism such as eco-feminism, liberal, and radical feminism to explore other salient characteristics of feminism embedded in Angelou's works.
- i.) Literary critics and researchers should consider utilizing other significant approaches aside from feminism and biography in evaluating the works of Angelou to encourage literary dialogue and discussion.
- j.) Angelou and her works should be incorporated in literature classes to understand how they mirror the social and cultural backgrounds of the past and how the readers can learn from these in shaping their present thoughts and perspectives.

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The authors confirm their equal contribution to every part of this research. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of this paper.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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