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Still I Rise: The Upanishad of the Oppressed

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Abstract

Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise* is a transcendent poetic declaration of resilience, dignity, and spiritual triumph over historical injustice. This poem, rooted in the African-American experience of slavery, racism, and suppression, rises beyond the limitations of cultural specificity to embrace a universal spiritual voice. Through rich metaphors, a rhythmic refrain, and unapologetic assertion of identity, Angelou articulates the indomitable nature of the human soul. This abstract explores how her poetic voice aligns with core philosophical teachings of the Upanishads and Vedanta — particularly the concepts of the *Atman* (Self), inner steadiness (*sthita-prajna*), karma, divine feminine energy (*Shakti*), and spiritual emancipation. By drawing parallels with scriptures such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, and *Vachanamrut*, this analysis reveals how Angelou's work reflects a modern manifestation of timeless dharmic truths — the soul's journey from bondage to liberation, from humiliation to transcendence. *Still I Rise* becomes, therefore, not only a literary gem but also a spiritual anthem echoing the wisdom of ancient traditions.

Preface

Still I Rise by Maya Angelou is a poem of defiance, dignity, and divine affirmation. It was written in a period when the legacy of slavery still cast long shadows on the lives of African-Americans, especially women. Angelou's poetic voice, however, does not plead or justify — it declares, celebrates, and ascends. With rhythmic confidence and profound symbolism, she reclaims history, body, and voice from centuries of degradation.

In examining this poem, we discover its unexpected spiritual kinship with ancient Indic philosophies — the Vedantic assertion of the undying Self (*Atman*), the *Bhagavad Gita*'s valorization of inner equanimity, and the *Upanishads*' truth of unbreakable consciousness. The boldness of Angelou's femininity reflects the fierce and graceful power of *Shakti* from the *Devi Mahatmya*. The poet's refusal to be diminished echoes the Vedic soul's mantra of self-realization: "Aham Brahmasmi" (I am Brahman).

This preface invites the reader to encounter *Still I Rise* not only as a voice of protest and empowerment but as a spiritual sadhana — a poetic yatra (journey) from sorrow to sovereignty, from insult to illumination, and from earth to ether.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Angelou's poem is a masterclass in poetic devices, with her careful use of metaphor, repetition, and symbolism reinforcing the themes of resistance and transcendence:

- **Metaphor:** The line "But still, like dust, I'll rise" employs metaphor to associate the speaker with an element of nature that cannot be suppressed. Later metaphors like "I'm a black ocean" and "I walk like I've got oil wells" signify the speaker's immense power and richness despite external attempts to reduce her.
- **Simile:** Similes such as "Just like moons and like suns" and "like dust" establish the inevitability of her resurgence, comparing her rising to celestial constants.
- **Personification:** Hate and oppression are given human qualities — "You may shoot me with your words" — portraying them as actively violent, which enhances the poem's emotional power.
- **Imagery:** Vivid imagery — "gold mines," "diamonds at the meeting of my thighs," "black ocean" — offers a sensual and empowering visualization of self-worth.

- **Alliteration and Assonance:** The repetition of sounds in “Shoulders falling down like teardrops” (soft ‘s’ sounds) and “Diggin’ in my own backyard” adds musicality and rhythm.
- **Irony:** Angelou’s calm yet assertive voice contrasts sharply with the violence and humiliation inflicted upon her, creating a powerful ironic effect.
- **Symbolism:** The repeated rising symbolizes transcendence, not just physical but spiritual, emotional, and historical.

2. Structure and Form

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem follows a loose and accessible rhyme pattern (mostly ABAB) that enhances its musicality and oral quality.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** Angelou utilizes a conversational rhythm. Her deliberate pauses and emphatic line endings give the poem a strong, chant-like quality.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** The structure of quatrains gives balance and emphasis, while the breaking of form in the final stanzas (particularly the repeated “I rise”) disrupts predictability to reflect triumph over imposed limitations.
- **Enjambment:** The continuation of meaning across lines without punctuation reflects the unstoppable momentum of the speaker’s spirit.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

- **Empowerment and Resilience:** At its core, the poem is about triumph over adversity, particularly in the context of racism, sexism, and historical trauma.
- **Heritage and Identity:** Angelou weaves African-American history into her assertion of identity — “Out of the huts of history’s shame... I am the dream and the hope of the slave.”
- **Defiance and Dignity:** The speaker refuses to be diminished by others’ perceptions. Her voice embodies unapologetic pride and self-love.
- **Hope and Transcendence:** The poem’s final image — “I rise / I rise / I rise” — becomes a mantra of hope and divine assertion.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Bold, assertive, and at times playful. Angelou’s rhetorical questions challenge the reader, especially those representing oppressive forces.
- **Mood:** Uplifting, empowering, and defiant. The repeated refrain “I rise” instills a feeling of strength and invincibility.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

Angelou’s poem resonates with **Vedantic** and **Upanishadic** ideals:

- **Atman and Self-Realization:** The poem echoes the Upanishadic idea that the *Atman* (true self) is indestructible. The speaker’s rising affirms, “The Self is not slain when the body is slain” (*Katha Upanishad* 2.18).
- **Gita’s Sthitaprajna (Steady Wisdom):** In the *Bhagavad Gita* (2.56), the wise one remains undisturbed by sorrow

and joy. Angelou’s speaker embodies this composure amidst provocation.

- **Vachanamrut’s Inner Strength:** Swaminarayan affirms in the *Vachanamrut* (Gadhada II-13) that a true devotee remains unaffected by the scorn of the world. The poet echoes this inner resilience.
- **Shrimad Bhagavatam’s Concept of Dharma and Endurance:** Angelou’s defiant dignity is akin to dharmic perseverance described in the *Shrimad Bhagavatam* (11.7.38), where one remains firm in truth and virtue despite trials.
- **Christian Allusions:** “Daybreak that’s wondrously clear” may evoke biblical imagery of resurrection and salvation, aligning her poem with broader spiritual ideas of renewal.

Maya Angelou’s *Still I Rise* resonates profoundly with the **Upanishadic and Vedantic worldview**, as well as teachings from the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*, *Vachanamrut*, *Shrimad Bhagavat Mahapurana*, and Vedic philosophy at large. Though composed in a different cultural and historical context, Angelou’s poem is a modern spiritual echo of the **indestructibility of the Self, inner dignity, freedom from bondage, and resilience through divine identity**. Below is an intertextual analysis that aligns Angelou’s work with Indic wisdom:

1. The Invincible Self (Atman) — Upanishads & Vedanta

Poem Reference:

“But still, like dust, I’ll rise.”

“I rise / I rise / I rise.”

Scriptural Parallel:

In the **Upanishads**, particularly the *Katha Upanishad*, the *Atman* is described as eternal, unbreakable, and untouched by worldly harm:

“The Self is not born, nor does it die... Unborn, eternal, everlasting, ancient, it is not slain when the body is slain.”

— *Katha Upanishad* 2.18ⁱ

Angelou’s repeated affirmation of “rising” despite oppression reflects the eternal and untouchable nature of the *Atman*. Just as dust rises again and again, the *Self* cannot be permanently subdued.

2. Steadfastness Amidst Oppression — Bhagavad Gita

Poem Reference:

“You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies... But still, like dust, I’ll rise.”

Scriptural Parallel:

The *Bhagavad Gita* teaches **equanimity** in the face of external injustice:

“He who is not disturbed by happiness and distress and is steady in both is certainly eligible for liberation.”

— *Bhagavad Gita* 2.15ⁱⁱ

Angelou’s refusal to be disturbed by scorn, violence, or hatred reflects the **sthita-prajna**, the wise person whose wisdom is firm and who remains unmoved by praise or blame.

3. Spiritual Dignity and Self-Assertion — Vachanamrut

“Does my sassiness upset you? / Why are you beset with gloom?”

“Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines / Diggin’ in my own backyard.”

Scriptural Parallel:

In the *Vachanamrut* (Gadhada II-13), **Bhagwan Swaminarayan** describes the ideal devotee who **never loses dignity** even in insult or hardship:

“A person who has firm refuge in God remains unaffected by honour or dishonour... he never forgets his true spiritual identity.”

Angelou’s tone of fearless confidence mirrors the *nirbhaya bhakti* (fearless devotion) and inner dignity taught in the *Vachanamrut*.

4. Karma and Transcendence — Bhagavad Gita & Bhagavatam

Poem Reference:

“You may shoot me with your words... But still, like air, I’ll rise.”

Scriptural Parallel:

This reflects the **Vedantic idea of rising above karma** through inner strength and spiritual awareness.

“As the wind carries away scents, so does the mind carry away the intellect when one is not controlled.”

— *Bhagavad Gita* 2.67ⁱⁱⁱ

But a person of self-control “attains peace” and cannot be shaken.

Also, the *Shrimad Bhagavatam* describes how devotees are **untouched by worldly insult**, comparing them to the **sky and wind**, which cannot be tainted.

“The Lord’s devotee is like the sky — unbound, unaffected.”

— *Bhagavatam* 11.7.38^{iv}

Angelou’s image of rising “like air” is beautifully symbolic of the subtle, free, **akasha-like nature** of the liberated soul.

5. Historical Injustice and the Rise of Dharma — Mahabharata & Bhagavatam

Poem Reference:

“Out of the huts of history’s shame / I rise”

“I am the dream and the hope of the slave.”

Scriptural Parallel:

The *Mahabharata* is filled with stories of dharma prevailing over adharma through patience, endurance, and righteous uprising (e.g., Draupadi’s humiliation and later justice). Angelou’s voice resembles that of **Draupadi or Kunti**, dignified even in historical suffering.

Also, in the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, the **birth of Krishna in a prison**, and his eventual overthrow of Kamsa, represents the **rise of righteousness from chains**.

6. Feminine Power (Shakti) — Devi Bhagavatam

Poem Reference:

“That I dance like I’ve got diamonds / At the meeting of my thighs?”

“Does my sexiness upset you?”

Poem Reference:

Scriptural Parallel:

This bold affirmation of **female strength and sensual sovereignty** reflects the **Devi Shakti** principle in Indic spirituality, where the feminine is not weak but cosmic and supreme.

“She who is Self-luminous, independent and all-pervading... is Devi.”

— *Devi Bhagavatam* 1.8.22^v

Angelou’s reclaiming of her body and voice is reminiscent of **Kali**, who both terrifies and redeems, and of **Durga**, who destroys injustice through her power and grace.

7. Divine Heritage and Collective Uplift — Vedas & Ramayana

Poem Reference:

“Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave / I am the dream and the hope of the slave.”

Scriptural Parallel:

The **Rig Veda** teaches that we are connected to our ancestors through **shraddha** and inherited dharma:

“We invoke our forefathers with respect, for their gifts and wisdom flow through us.”

— *Rig Veda* 10.15.1^{vi}

Her words also reflect **Rama’s dharma** in the *Ramayana* — fulfilling not just personal goals, but the sacred **duty of a lineage**, the rise of justice in memory of a sacred heritage.

Conclusion: A Vedantic Affirmation of Eternal Spirit

Still I Rise mirrors the Upanishadic declaration of **Tat Tvam Asi — That Thou Art** — asserting that every being contains divine essence, and no amount of suppression can destroy it. Maya Angelou, though writing from the context of racial and historical oppression, voices the eternal human call of the soul toward freedom, dignity, and truth.

In this sense, her poem becomes a **modern Vedantic scripture**, affirming the **unity of Self, spiritual sovereignty, and freedom from bondage**. The ultimate Vedantic truth — “*na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre*” (the Self is not killed when the body is slain) — reverberates through every triumphant refrain:

I rise.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

• **Time and Background:** Written during the late 20th century, *Still I Rise* emerges from the African-American Civil Rights Movement and post-colonial discourse.

• **Sociopolitical Influence:** Angelou speaks from the experience of Black oppression, particularly slavery, segregation, and systemic racism.

• **Literary Movement:** The poem is grounded in **Black Feminist and African-American oral traditions**—its cadence, repetition, and rhetorical devices reflect both sermon and song.

7. Poet’s Perspective and Emotional Mindset

• **Inspiration:** Maya Angelou, as a survivor of racism, sexual trauma, and silence, transforms personal pain into poetic power.

• **Emotions:** The poem oscillates between pain and pride, hurt and healing. Her confidence is not arrogant but ancestral — a collective strength from historical suffering.

• **Autobiographical Elements:** Angelou's autobiographies (especially *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) parallel the poem's themes of rising from trauma and silencing.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

• **Audience:** The poem speaks to the oppressed, especially Black women, but its message extends to anyone who has faced injustice, humiliation, or prejudice.

• **Purpose:** It seeks to *reclaim power*, inspire resilience, and assert human dignity. It critiques historical distortion, but more importantly, offers a vision of freedom and spiritual radiance.

9. Personal Interpretation

Still I Rise is not just a personal declaration but a spiritual and philosophical proclamation. It teaches that the true Self (*Atman*) cannot be confined or defined by external suppression. The poem resonates across traditions and cultures, from the African-American struggle to Vedantic non-dualism, from Biblical resurrection to feminist autonomy.

Personally, the poem feels like an *Upanishadic chant of invincibility* — echoing the eternal Self's affirmation of "neti neti" (not this, not this) to all forces that attempt to bind it. It's a call to awaken, to rise — not once, but repeatedly, eternally.

Conclusion

Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise* closes not with resignation or reflection, but with a crescendo of spiritual defiance — "I rise / I rise / I rise." These words transcend personal pride and become the voice of the *jiva* (individual soul) awakening to its true nature. Much like the *Atman*, which cannot be destroyed by weapons or fire (*Gita* 2.23), Angelou's poetic self asserts that no historical lie, social oppression, or violent gaze can extinguish her light.

Her poem, in Vedantic terms, is a revelation of the Self (*Atma Bodha*) — fearless, eternal, joyful. Her voice bears the weight of ancestral pain and transforms it into luminous presence. Echoing the wisdom of scriptures like the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, *Vachanamrut*, and *Upanishads*, Angelou embodies the truth that the spirit cannot be enslaved — it can only rise.

In the final analysis, *Still I Rise* is not just a poem — it is a hymn. A hymn to freedom, to divine remembrance, and to the quiet but powerful truth that beneath the dust, wounds, and silence, the soul remembers its wings. And it rises. Always.

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Foot note

- I. न जायते म्रियते वा विपश्चिन्नायं कुतश्चिन्न बभूव कश्चित् ।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥ १८ ॥
- II. यं हि न व्यथयन्त्येते पुरुषं पुरुषर्षभ ।
समदुःखसुखं धीरं सोऽमृतत्वाय कल्पते ॥ 15॥
- III. इन्द्रियाणां हि चरतां यन्मनोऽनुविधीयते ।
तदस्य हरति प्रज्ञां वायुर्नाविमिवाम्भसि ॥ 67॥
- IV. शश्वत्परार्थसर्वेहः परार्थैकान्तसम्भवः ।
साधुः शिक्षेत भूमृत्तो नगशिष्यः परात्मताम् ॥ ३८ ॥
- V. नमः पङ्कजनाभाय नमः पङ्कजमालिने ।
नमः पङ्कजनेत्राय नमस्ते पङ्कजाङ्घ्रये ॥ २२ ॥
- VI. उदीरतामवर उत्परांस उन्मध्यमाः पितरः सोम्यासः । असुं य
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