

Research Article



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Intersections of the knowledge-power nexus as a precursor to (dis)empowerment and resistance in the poetry of Maya Angelou

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Abstract

This article investigates how knowledge and its recursive relation with power is manifested in the poetry of Maya Angelou. It analyses how various contexts, such as the social, political, cultural and historical, inform knowledge production and how the Foucauldian concept of the knowledge/power nexus is employed as a strategy of (dis)empowerment and resistance by marginalized persons in her poetry. It also, explores how Angelou's poetry utilises the female body as the site of the manifestation of the knowledge/power nexus and resistance. The article utilises textual data obtained through critical reading and analysis of poems from *The Complete Collected Poetry of Maya Angelou*. In its analyses, it makes use of three poems; *Men and Phenomenal Woman* and *Seven Women's Blessed Assurance*. It concludes that the knowledge/power nexus as manifested in her poetry is representative of a vantage point from which one stands empowered to re-examine their social situation and re conceptualize ways in which to subvert domination.

Keywords: empowerment, intersections, knowledge, power, resistance, social context

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Public Interest Statement

The most important aspect of this study is that it explores how Angelou's poetry utilises the female body as the site of the manifestation of the knowledge/power nexus and resistance. It utilises textual data obtained through critical reading and analysis of poems from *The Complete Collected Poetry of Maya Angelou*.

1.1 Introduction

Michael Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in his discussion on knowledge production, introduces the concept of power, arguing that in producing knowledge, one automatically makes a claim to power. This idea is further discussed in *Prison Talk* where he clearly asserts that "it is impossible for power to be exercised without knowledge; it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (52). From his discussions, it is evident that the relationship between knowledge and power is recursive, such that, the acquisition of knowledge enables power, and imbalances of power relations provide opportunities for power production. He therefore posits that knowledge and power exist in an intersectional relationship, such that, knowledge enables the exercise of power, while power shapes knowledge. Foucault further argues that this relation is best discussed using the compound *knowledge/power* as none can exist without the other. He then introduces the notion of understanding knowledge through the processes of its production and organization. Hence to him, knowledge production does not happen in void, but takes place through particular technologies and strategies, in specific situations, historical contexts and institutions of power. This means that in order to understand knowledge production, it must be studied within the social context in which it is produced and within the power structures that shape it.

The significance of the context in which knowledge production takes place has been emphasized by Patricia Collins. Examining knowledge production in two categories of people; she opines that power operates differently within the fields of knowledge production in marginalized and non-marginalized groups. She begins her essay *Learning from The Outsider Within*, with the proposition that knowledge is socially situated, and that the marginalized are also socially situated in ways that enable them to question issues more than the non-marginalized. She therefore argues that the process of knowledge production begins when those who are marginalized and relatively invisible from the 'eyes' of the epistemically privileged become conscious of their marginalization and begin to find a voice, challenging points of views advanced by the socially and politically dominant. She further posits that, it is at this point that, the marginalized begin to disbelieve the oppressors' views of themselves as small and insignificant, and in so doing, claim their voices and begin to empower themselves by naming reality as they see it. Hence, knowledge generated within certain social contexts between those in power and those not in power acts as a tool for exercising power in every society. Conversely, power relations within these interactions and experiences within these social contexts shape knowledge produced by the marginalized persons.

This form of knowledge, acquired from interactions within certain social environments is mainly acquired through perception and reflection has been described as experiential knowledge. Constantin Bratianu describes this knowledge as one that is created by a powerful interaction between emotional, rational and spiritual aspects since it involves the active participation of the

whole mind and body. Experiential knowledge is highly personal and therefore several people getting contact with the same experiences will acquire different experiential knowledges. This paper examines the knowledge/power intersection in the poetry of Maya Angelou and how the production of experiential knowledge leads to the empowerment of the marginalized and enables them to resist marginalization.

1.2 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach and was conducted through textual analysis. The objective of the study was to; identify and describe the knowledge/power intersection as manifested in the poetry of Maya Angelou and thereafter analyse how the knowledge/power nexus is employed as a strategy of empowerment and resistance in her poetry. The study deployed the purposive sampling technique to select poems for this study. The source of the poems was the anthology *The Complete Collected Poetry of Maya Angelou*. The study was guided by the intersectionality theory and primary data and secondary data collected was analysed in line with the objectives of the study and the guiding theoretical frameworks. Being a qualitative study, analysis was done by critical examination of data from the poems and secondary sources. Through critical analysis, a comprehensive synthesis and interpretation of data gathered from primary and secondary sources was undertaken, in order to come up with valid, verifiable, research conclusions.

1.3 Presentation of Findings

In the poem *Men* (p. 132), Angelou details how knowledge is constructed by a young lady through experiences in certain phases of her life. Through a recall of events from her past, and its connection to the situation she finds herself in, Angelou highlights how experiential knowledge gained by the young lady during various facets of her interactions with men from teenage to adulthood informs a re-configuration of her relations with masculinity. The poem demonstrates how the girl's acquisition of knowledge empowers her to resist what she feels is unfair treatment from masculinity. In the first stanza, narrated in the past tense, the young girl, aged fifteen years and full of naiveté teenage desire, is awed by men as she watches them from her window.

When I was young, I used to
Watch behind the curtains
As men walked up and down
The street. Wino men, old men.
Young men sharp as mustard.
See them, men are always
Going somewhere
They knew I was there. Fifteen
Years old and starving for them
(Angelou, p. 132).

In the above stanza, the young girl begins her narrative using the first pronoun *I* to place herself as the centre of admiration of men, expressing joy at the fact that they notice her and

shower her with attention. In the second stanza, her experiences at the hands of the men cause her to become conscious of the unequal power relations that universally pervade relations between men and women. Thus, in her narration at this point, she shifts to the use of second person pronoun, *you*, detaching herself from the description of her delicateness at the hands of the men and the seemingly blissful first encounter with them. With the new awareness, she cautions the reader that men hold *you*; “In the palms of their hands, gentle, as if you /Were the last raw egg in the world” (p. 132). Hence, in these three lines, it is evident that her past experiences have informed her knowledge on certain ways that all women are treated by men.

In the second stanza, written in simple present tense, the men’s gentle touch is soon replaced by depictions of hurt and betrayal. She gives a detailed account of how a gentle gesture of affection offered by the man progresses from a hug, to a squeeze and finally to a strangling that leaves her breathless and shattered. It is in this stanza that the knowledge/ power nexus is manifested as the girl comes to a realization; “Your mind pops, exploding fiercely, briefly/ Like the head of a kitchen match” (p. 132). These two lines portray an enlightenment that enables the girl’s exercise of power. Throughout the second stanza, the negotiations of power between her and the men in the private space result in the production and shaping of knowledge that enables a reconstruction of gender relations, and consequently, resistance. The Foucauldian power/ knowledge concept in which structures of power mould and reinforce knowledge production is manifested in this poem in two ways. One, the realization of her defencelessness (enabled by the acquisition of experiential knowledge) becomes the point of intersection between knowledge and power, where the girl becomes conscious of her naivety and begins to re strategize. Again, the power struggles evidenced in the relations between her and these men shape the production of new knowledge acquired by the young lady and become a precursor to resistance. Armed with new knowledge that has been constructed by the experience of abuse she goes through in the hands of the men; she begins to exercise power to resist the men’s advances. Hence, her resistance is evident after this encounter, so that;

When the earth rights itself again
And taste tries to return to the tongue
Your body has slammed shut forever.
No keys exist

(Angelou, p. 132)

David Sibley has argued that the production of new knowledge threatens established knowledge and has the power to destabilize or overrun existing social hierarchies (p. 116) and thereafter empower the marginalized. In view of this, it is possible to argue that the new knowledge acquired by girl through her experiences and interactions within her social context then, empowers her to re configure her place with the men who attempt to woe her. This greatly impacts on the trajectory of her future relations with the opposite gender, such that, after her encounter with this new knowledge, her naïve awe at the sight of men that was evident in the first stanza is replaced with defiance in the final stanza, and this time;

When the window draws full upon

Your mind. There just beyond
The sway of curtains, men walk.
Knowing something
Going someplace.
But this time you will simply
Stand and watch.
(Angelou, p. 133)

In this final stanza, armed with new knowledge that has been shaped by her previous experiences with men, she becomes “the subject who knows” (Foucault, p. 27) and refuses to allow herself to guilelessly fall into the hands of the oppressor again. In this poem, Maya clearly brings out the knowledge/power transformation by depicting the empowered and enlightened young girl as a product of the intersections of the knowledge/power systems of her society. It is at the intersection of the knowledge/ power nexus that the young girl is empowered to make decisions on her future reactions to the men’s advances. In this stanza, the knowledge/ power nexus serves as a dis-empowerment strategy where the men’s power over the young the young lady no longer holds; as this time, she does fall for their charms.

Richard Johnson has argued that the knowledge produced when people reflect on their experiences in situations where they feel marginalized is useful in that it helps them generate further insight and understanding into the causes of their conditions and struggles and also enables them develop strategies to bring about change. Further, as has been argued by Judith Butler, gender relations are constructed by discourse (knowledge) and power. Hence, as the poem ends, the experiential knowledge that the persona purveys, then, is coloured and informed by her interactions with power, enabling her construct her own viewpoint and her own understanding of the world of men.

As discussed in the introduction of this paper, one of the ways of rethinking marginalization is engaging in the production of oppositional knowledge. Through the production of such knowledge, dominant discourses are re appropriated for empowerment of the marginalized and in effect, self-representation. In *Phenomenal Woman* (p. 130), Angelou uses the black female body as the site in which oppositional knowledge is produced in order to resist disciplinary power on the black female body.

Examining dominant discourses that govern standards of beauty in the American society, it is evident that historically, there has existed a racialized sense of aesthetics that positioned blackness as ugly and grotesque. Whiteness on the other hand was revered as a symbol of beauty, nobility and perfection (Brown, p. 5). This means that the black female body was traditionally viewed as alien and imperfect, and subjected to surveillance, as seen in the case of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman who, courtesy of her big buttocks and breasts was considered so hideous that she was exhibited in freak shows across Europe in the 19th Century. Noel Carroll identifies this implied grotesquery as a form of denigration, and notes that, the association of individuals or members of a certain social group, (such as race or ethnic group) with ugliness can lead to their othering by those considered beautiful (p. 38). Mikhail Bakhtin however, iterates that the perception of certain persons as ugly and their subsequent othering is at the very epicentre of the construction of a body that is able to resist ideologies, because by virtue of it

having “the right to be ‘other’ in this world, it attains the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available” (p. 159). It is therefore this inherent power in the othered black female body that Maya Angelou situates the knowledge/power nexus in her poetry to speak against resist cultural concepts of beauty.

Foucault has elaborated how disciplinary power is exercised on othered bodies. He argues that the imposition of certain norms on bodies results in the othering of bodies that do not conform to these specified norms, making them objects of surveillance. Hence, for disciplinary power, the established system of knowledge aspires to know the body as an object to be known in relation to others who are known. Subsequently, deviations from the norm are defined as abnormal, creating the notion that non-conformity and difference translate to inferiority and otherness (1991, pp. 177–184). One of the ways in which this disciplinary power can be resisted is by reiterating and rearticulating dominant discourses to enable the creation of a reverse discourse (Butler, pp. 1995: 236). Hence, as will be demonstrated in the analysis below, *Phenomenal Woman*, engages in the creation of reverse discourses to resist disciplinary power exercised on the black female body.

The first stanza begins with an assertion that discriminative perimeters of beauty such as cuteness and fashion model size specifications cannot be used to measure the beauty of the black woman. “Pretty women wonder where my secret lies / I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size” (p. 130). These two lines also present the knowledge that the persona is aware of her non conformity to the socially normalized canons of beauty. This rearticulation of repressive discourses that define beauty on certain specifics then, serves as the stepping ground for the creation of reverse discourse. This in itself is an exercise of power aimed at destabilizing the institutional control of knowledge about the disciplined female black body. Further, the re-definition of the parameters of beauty to normalize the black female body manifests an intersection of the knowledge/power nexus, where the exercise of power shapes oppositional knowledge that is produced as a resistance to disciplinary power. The production of this knowledge on the other hand empowers the black female with agency, hence re situating beauty “In the span of my hips /In the stride of my step/ The curl of my lips” (p. 130), effectively, serving as a dis-empowerment strategy to hegemonic discourses that denigrate the black female body. In another poem *Seven Women’s Blessed Assurance* (p. 261), the persona takes pride in her big body that would otherwise be considered as obese, unhealthy and ugly within contemporary American standards of beauty:

I’m fat as butter
And sweet as cake
Men start to tremble
Each time I shake
(Angelou, p. 261).

In both poems, Maya engages the intersection of knowledge and power to reposition beauty on the width of the hips, the lips, the eyes, the arched back and the breasts. It is important to note that each of these parts of the black female body mentioned in the poem has historically been the focus of disciplinary power and has been delineated as imperfect in White hegemonic

culture.

Kimberly Wallace-Sanders notes that the Black female body in American culture always has had some imperfection; kinky hair, hips too wide, a back that was overburdened through years of slavery, evil eyes, or breasts so ugly and gigantic, that it was rumoured that some slave women carrying babies on their backs “could suckle over their shoulder” (p. 37). Stevens further argues that black women can only exercise power over this cultural hegemony by rewriting the canons of beauty in their own terms (p. 3). This re writing can be read as the appropriation of agency to speak for oneself. Hence in this poem, the very parts of the black female body that have historically been labelled grotesque by disciplinary power are celebrated as the new paradigms of aesthetics. This can be read within Foucault’s notion of writing “reversed discourses” (Foucault, 1981, p. 101), a strategy of power in which subalterns make use of the categories and terms inscribed by the dominating force or norm to resist it. Foucault illustrates this notion of resistance as a ‘reverse’ discourse through the notion of homosexuality, arguing that resistance to sexual oppression was only possible when “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault, 1981, p. 101). Hence, the reverse discourse rides on the power of the ‘dominant discourse’ and resistance is achieved as the effect of power and as a part of power itself (Butler, 1995, p. 237). Through its redefinition of beauty achieved using the same parameters that have been culturally used to trash African beauty, *Phenomenal Woman* creates a reverse discourse as an exercise of power, whereby using the words “I am a woman. Phenomenally”, it reaffirms the womanhood of the black female. The act of re articulating the canons of beauty based on one’s own standard empowers the female narrator in *Phenomenal Woman* and enables her exercise agency.

1.4 Conclusion

This paper investigated the knowledge/power nexus as a strategy of empowerment in the poetry of Maya Angelou. It explored how knowledge production in certain social contexts enables, not only a re-envisioning and recreation of the past, but also an understanding and transformation of the present through oppositional knowledge. The study also demonstrated how this oppositional knowledge is informed by the experiences of marginalized persons and shaped by power relations evident in their struggles with issues of class and gender discrimination. Through their lived experiences in a social context where hegemonic discourses prevail, the acquisition of experiential knowledge and its intersection with power enables the individual to resist marginalization. The intersection of the knowledge /power nexus therefore, becomes the focal point from which the individuals are empowered and resistance is conceptualised. As manifested in the poems analysed, knowledge production in itself becomes a form of (dis)empowerment that enables the re conceptualization of one’s situation in order to contest power relations and transform existing subjectivities as seen in the persona in *Men*. Knowledge production also enables the re-articulation of dominant discourses for the empowerment of marginalized persons.

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Biographies:

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