



CENTRO DE INVESTIGACIONES
DE TRABAJO SOCIAL

ISSN 2244-808X
DL pp 201002Z43506

PERSPECTIVA ACCIÓN Y

Revista de Trabajo Social

Vol. 15 No. 2
Abril - Junio
2025

Universidad del Zulia

Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Políticas
Centro de Investigaciones en Trabajo Social

La imagen de la maternidad como fenómeno sociocultural: un estudio cualitativo-cuantitativo de la obra de Maya Angelou

Gulsaira Ibraimova¹, Kanykei Kalieva², Makhabat Alishova³,
Zhyldyz Chymanova⁴, Aiida Asylbekova⁵

¹Profesor Asociado de la Universidad Estatal Kirguisa que lleva el nombre de I. Arabaev, Bishkek, República Kirguisa.

E-mail: gulsara2508@mail.ru; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9458-2181>.

²Profesor asociado de la Universidad Kirguiso-Turca de Manas, Bishkek, República Kirguisa.

E-mail: kanykei.kalieva@manas.edu.kg; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4121-3163>.

³Profesor asociado en la Universidad Estatal de Bishkek que lleva el nombre de K. Karasaev, Bishkek, República Kirguisa.

E-mail: alishova.mahabat@mail.ru; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6174-9839>.

⁴Profesor titular de la Universidad kirguiso-turca de Manas, Bishkek, República Kirguisa.

E-mail: cildiz.cimanova@manas.edu.kg; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6336-1952>.

⁵Profesor titular de la Universidad kirguiso-turca de Manas, Bishkek, República Kirguisa.

E-mail: aasylbekova@yahoo.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0320-5057>.

Resumen. La poesía de Maya Angelou aborda temas de identidad, resistencia y las luchas a las que se enfrentan las mujeres, haciendo hincapié en la imagen de la madre. Este trabajo explora la representación de la madre en la obra poética de Angelou, centrándose en su papel como símbolo de identidad cultural y encarnación de la fuerza emocional y espiritual. A través de un enfoque crítico temático, este estudio examina cómo Angelou entrelaza las experiencias personales con la memoria colectiva para representar la figura de la madre de un modo que trasciende las nociones tradicionales, entretejiendo reflexiones socioculturales más amplias sobre la maternidad. Utilizando una combinación de métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos, el artículo analiza la prevalencia de las figuras femeninas, en particular las madres, en “The Complete Collected Poems” (1994) de Angelou, clasificando su representación a través de varias dimensiones como el amor, el sacrificio, la opresión racial y el orgullo cultural. En última instancia, este estudio destaca la centralidad de la maternidad en la exploración que Angelou hace de la feminidad, ofreciendo una comprensión más profunda de sus contribuciones literarias a las tradiciones literarias feminista y afroamericana.

Palabras clave: poesía, representación de la mujer, imagen de la madre, Maya Angelou, maternidad.

The image of motherhood as a socio-cultural phenomenon: a qualitative-quantitative study of Maya Angelou's works

Abstract. Maya Angelou's poetry engages with themes of identity, resilience, and the struggles women face, with an emphasis on the image of the mother. This paper explores the representation of mothers in Angelou's poetic works, focusing on their roles as symbols of cultural identity, and embodiments of emotional and spiritual strength. Through a thematic critical approach, this study examines how Angelou intertwines personal experiences with collective memory to depict the figure of the mother in a way that transcends traditional notions, weaving in broader socio-cultural reflections on motherhood. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, the paper analyzes the prevalence of female figures, particularly mothers, in Angelou's "The Complete Collected Poems" (1994), categorizing their portrayal across various dimensions such as love, sacrifice, racial oppression, and cultural pride. Ultimately, this study highlights the centrality of motherhood in Angelou's exploration of womanhood, offering a deeper understanding of her literary contributions to feminist and African American literary traditions.

Key words: poetry, representation of women, image of mother, Maya Angelou, mothering.

INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou's poetry is deeply rooted in thematic representations of womanhood, race, and resilience, particularly as experienced by Black women in America. Her work reflects a feminist and African American literary tradition that prioritizes personal narratives as a means of conveying broader socio-cultural issues. Central to her exploration of these themes is the image of the mother, who is portrayed as a multifaceted figure embodying love, sacrifice, cultural identity, and spiritual strength. The thematic approach considers the diverse roles mothers play in Angelou's work, from emotional anchors to symbols of resilience in the face of racial oppression. Poems such as "Mothering Blackness" and "Woman Work" reflect the duality of motherhood, where the mother is depicted both as a source of comfort and as a figure burdened by societal expectations and struggles (Angelou, 1994). Angelou often juxtaposes nurturing imagery with the harsh realities of racial and gender-based oppression, thus creating a complex narrative of what it means to be a mother in the Black American experience. By emphasizing themes such as cultural pride, personal sacrifice, and spiritual fulfillment, Angelou's poetry serves as both a personal reflection and a socio-cultural critique.

THEORETICAL ASPECTS

Mothering has been a central theme in literary studies, social theory, psychology, and feminist studies, with scholars examining the expectations, roles, and images associated with motherhood across various cultures and historical periods. Mothers are often idealized as the foundation of moral and social order, leading to the perception of the mother as a figure responsible for shaping not only individual children but also society as a whole. Scholars have introduced theoretical concepts surrounding mothering, such as "Intensive Mothering" (Hays, 1996), which refers to the expectation

that mothers must be highly involved, nurturing, and attentive to their children's needs, often relying on expert advice rather than personal intuition. This ideology has become a dominant cultural narrative, positioning mothers as responsible for their children's future success or failure, frequently at the expense of their own desires and identities (Hays, 1996). Sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that the advice offered by experts has transformed motherhood into a serious responsibility. Beginning in the mid-20th century, mothers became increasingly reliant on childcare manuals and professional advice, seeing themselves as caretakers whose actions could have significant long-term effects on their children's development (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Martin Woodhead (1997) discusses how the needs of children and the role of mothers are shaped by cultural projections. She argues that professional advice on parenting creates an image of what children supposedly need, which mothers are expected to fulfill, based on adult societal values rather than the actual needs of children (Woodward, 1997). The other scholars highlight the societal pressures and expectations placed on mothers, reinforcing the notion that motherhood is not just a personal role but a culturally constructed and socially enforced identity (Ruddick, 1983).

In alignment with thematic, feminist and post-colonial critiques (Glenn, 1994), Angelou's representation of the mother figure also reclaims the maternal image from patriarchal and Eurocentric narratives, presenting the mother as a source of empowerment (Bell, 1979). This analysis of Angelou's poetic themes provides a critical framework for understanding how the poet elevates the maternal figure to a symbol of cultural and emotional resilience, deeply intertwined with the collective experience of African American women.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both **quantitative** and **qualitative** analyses to explore the representation of mothers in Maya Angelou's poetry. The methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and significance of the maternal figure in Angelou's work, while also offering in-depth thematic analysis.

Quantitative analysis was conducted on *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994), focusing on the number of times women are referenced and how many poems are explicitly dedicated to them (Angellou, 1994). Out of the 167 poems in the collection, 1227 instances of female representation were recorded, with 37 poems specifically dedicated to women, and 12 focused on mothers. This quantitative data offers insight into the prominence of the female experience, particularly motherhood, within Angelou's body of work. A specific focus is given to poems where the mother figure plays a central role in conveying broader thematic messages, such as resilience, love, and cultural pride.

Qualitative aspect of the study involves a **thematic analysis** of selected poems, particularly those in which mothers are portrayed, such as "Mothering Blackness", "Woman Work," and "A Song Flung Up to Heaven". Each poem is examined for recurring motifs, metaphors, and symbols that contribute to the representation of the mother as a figure of emotional and cultural significance. This analysis seeks to uncover how Angelou uses imagery and metaphor to convey the maternal experience within a broader socio-political context. By drawing on feminist and post-colonial theoretical frameworks, this study explores the intersection of race, gender, and motherhood in Angelou's work.

Categorization and symbolic interpretation were held to categorize the portrayal of mothers in Angelou's poetry, a detailed symbolic interpretation of the mother as a protector, nurturer, cultural anchor, and spiritual guide is conducted. This involves close readings of selected poems, focusing on the recurring symbols associated with motherhood, such as warmth, home, shelter, and heritage. Additionally, the use of cultural and religious imagery in Angelou's depiction of mothers is explored, particularly in relation to African American identity and the historical experience of Black women in the United States.

Diagrammatic representation is used to visually represent the categorization of women in Angelou's poetry, with a particular focus on mothers. This helps to illustrate the central role that the maternal figure plays within the broader thematic framework of Angelou's work.

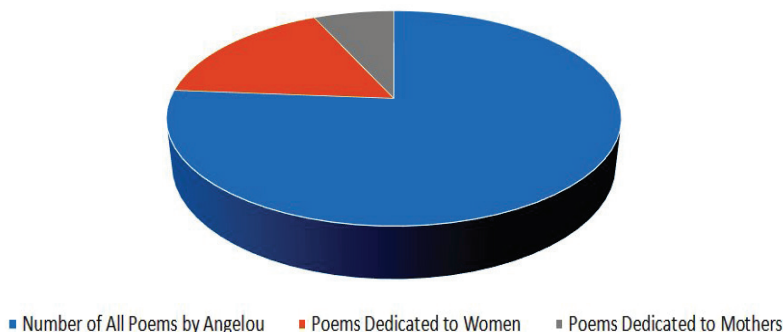
By using this combination of methods, the study provides a multifaceted view of how Angelou represents the image of the mother in her poetry, offering both statistical evidence and detailed thematic interpretation. The mixed-methods approach allows for a nuanced understanding of Angelou's portrayal of motherhood as both a personal and a collective experience, deeply rooted in cultural, racial, and gendered identities.

THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ANGELOU'S POETRY

Maya Angelou, a celebrated poet and author, often portrayed the image of women in her poetry, particularly emphasizing themes such as identity, resilience, and the struggles women face. Among her depictions, the image of the mother is especially profound, where she intertwines personal experiences, collective memory, and socio-cultural reflections on motherhood. This paper will examine how Angelou represents women, especially mothers, by analyzing selected poems from *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (Angelou, 1994). Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, we will explore the prevalence of women and mothers in her poetry and categorize their portrayal.

Before exploring the specific representation of mothers, it is essential to assess how women are portrayed overall in Angelou's poetry. A quantitative analysis of the 167 poems in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* reveals that women are mentioned in 1227 instances. Out of these, 37 poems are explicitly dedicated to women, which constitutes 22.15% of her total poetic work. Additionally, 110 of the 167 poems (approximately 65.87%) are narrated from the perspective of female speakers. This analysis underscores Angelou's significant focus on women, making the female experience, in various forms, a central theme in her body of work.

Graph 1. Number of women represented in Maya Angelou's poetry



From this analysis, it is clear that women occupy a critical space in Angelou's poetry, whether as subjects or speakers. Mothers, in particular, emerge as symbolic figures who embody strength, resilience, love, and sacrifice. Angelou often uses the image of the mother to address broader societal issues, such as racial oppression and the collective experiences of African American women.

CATEGORIZATION OF WOMEN IN ANGELOU'S POETRY

A detailed analysis of the 37 poems dedicated to women allows us to categorize the representation of women into various types. Among these categories, mothers stand out as figures of nurturing, sacrifice, and emotional resilience. We identified five primary categories: the poetess herself, oppressed women, confident women, goddesses, and mothers. Each category represents a specific aspect of womanhood, but for the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the portrayal of mothers.

The image of mother in Angelou's poetry

One of the central ways in which Angelou represents the image of the mother is through her dual role as a nurturer and a figure of sacrifice. This duality is especially apparent in the poem *Mothering Blackness*, where the mother is depicted not only as a beloved figure but also as someone who has endured pain and oppression. The opening lines set the tone for this characterization:

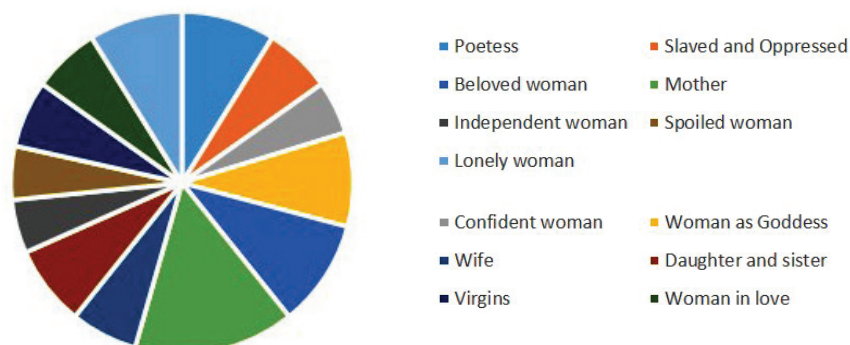
“She came down creeping / here to the black arms waiting / now to the warm heart waiting...” (Angelou, 1994: 51).

In these lines, Angelou uses imagery such as “black arms” and “warm heart” to depict the mother as a comforting and nurturing presence. The maternal figure is the one who is constantly awaited and cherished, signifying the deep bond between mother and child. However, this depiction is layered with the history of racial oppression and suffering, as seen in the following lines:

“Deep in the smothering blackness / white tears icicle gold plains of her face / She came home running...” (Angelou, 1994: 51).

Here, Angelou juxtaposes the mother's nurturing role with her status as an oppressed figure. The “white tears” and “icicle” imagery convey the deep emotional pain she has endured, symbolizing the historical suffering of Black women. The mother's return home signifies both an escape and a return to the safety of her familial role.

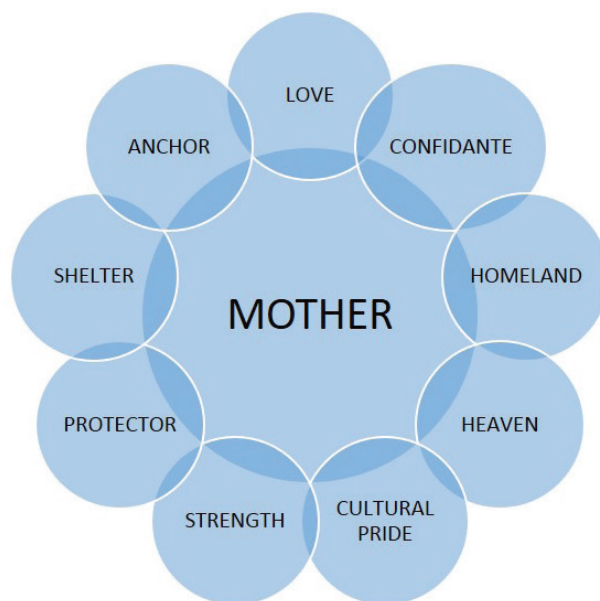
Graph 2. Representation of the image of women in Maya Angelou's poetry



In this diagram, the representation of women in Maya Angelou's poetry is broken down into various categories, with a specific focus on the figure of the mother. The diagram shows that out of a set of poems dedicated to women, 12 are specifically categorized as focusing on the mother. This highlights the prominence of motherhood in Angelou's portrayal of women. The diagram further classifies other representations of women, showing that Angelou also explores various aspects of womanhood, including the poetess, oppressed women, goddesses, beloved women, and others. Each category explores the diverse experiences and roles women occupy in Angelou's work, but the significant number of poems (12) focusing on mothers suggests that motherhood holds a central place in her poetic exploration of womanhood.

In Maya Angelou's poetry, the image of the mother transcends traditional roles, capturing the multifaceted nature of motherhood. Angelou's portrayal of the mother figure is rich and varied, embodying love, trust, a connection to homeland, spirituality, and cultural pride.

Graph 3. Representation of the image of mother in Maya Angelou's poetry



Mother as Love

In the lines, “And you will learn the words of love / Mother Brother Father Sister Lover Friend” (Angelou, 1994: 86), Angelou presents the mother as a fundamental source of love and nurturing. She connects the figure of the mother to universal bonds of affection and care, equating maternal love with the love shared among family members, friends, and romantic partners. This passage suggests that a mother's love is central to learning how to love others and oneself. It speaks to the idea that the mother is a primary, formative source of affection, teaching the child the very language of love and relationships.

Mother as Confidante

In the excerpt where the daughter confides in her mother—“Of all he said, I understood / he said he loved another” (Angelou, 1994: 132)—the mother is portrayed as a trusted confidante. The daughter, feeling hurt by love, seeks her mother's wisdom and comfort. This passage highlights the mother's

role as a listener and emotional anchor, offering guidance and solace during moments of emotional vulnerability. The mother-daughter bond is deepened through this sharing of personal pain, demonstrating the trust and support that is intrinsic to their relationship. The mother's dry-eyed demeanor suggests strength, patience, and an understanding of the complexities of life and love.

Mother as Homeland (Africa)

Angelou metaphorically links the mother to the African homeland in the vivid and richly symbolic imagery of her poem: "Taste me fruit / its juice free-falling from / a mother tree. / Know me / Africa." (Angelou, 1994: 147). Here, the "mother tree" becomes a powerful metaphor for Africa, representing roots, sustenance, and cultural identity. The mother is depicted as the origin of life and the preserver of cultural heritage. Africa, as the mother, is a source of strength, history, and belonging for those of African descent. In this poem, the connection between mother and homeland symbolizes the nurturing and life-giving role of both, suggesting that just as the mother nourishes her child, Africa nourishes the spirit and cultural identity of its people.

Mother as Heaven

Angelou explores the spiritual dimension of motherhood in the lines, "You said that / You would take me to glory / To sit down at the welcome table." (Angelou, 1994: 271). In this portrayal, the mother is associated with the promise of heaven, eternal life, and divine peace. She is not only a source of earthly comfort but also a guide who leads her child toward spiritual fulfillment and salvation. The mention of the "welcome table" evokes Christian imagery of paradise, where loved ones are reunited after death. This reinforces the idea that the mother transcends the physical world and becomes an eternal figure of love and protection. In the final lines—"Rejoice with my mother in heaven / And I'm stepping out on Your word" (Angelou, 1994: 292)—Angelou once again links the mother to the idea of heaven and salvation. The mother is portrayed as a figure who has passed on but continues to inspire strength and resilience in her child. The act of "stepping out on Your word" suggests that the speaker is continuing to live in faith, guided by the lessons and love of her mother, now in heaven. This imagery of the mother as a heavenly figure underscores her role as a constant source of strength, even in death.

Mother as Cultural and Personal Pride

In the passage "White folks used to stop / My mother / Just to look at me. / (All black babies / Are Cute.)" (Angelou, 1994: 293), Angelou touches upon the theme of cultural pride and identity through the mother's eyes. The mother here is proud of her child, despite the racial dynamics at play, and this pride reflects a broader sense of resilience and self-worth in the face of societal prejudice. The humor and subtle irony in the phrase "(All black babies / Are Cute)" points to Angelou's critique of the fetishization of Black children by white people, but it also highlights a mother's unwavering admiration for her child. This moment reinforces the mother's role as a source of cultural pride and personal identity.

Mother as a Symbol of Strength and Resilience

In addition to her role as a nurturer, the mother in Angelou's poetry often symbolizes strength and emotional resilience. The poem *Woman Work* exemplifies this representation, where the speaker lists her endless tasks and responsibilities:

“I’ve got the children to tend / The clothes to mend / The floor to mop / The food to shop / Then the chicken to fry / The baby to dry...” (Angelou, 1994: 241).

The repetitive structure and rhythm of these lines emphasize the relentless nature of a mother’s work. The speaker’s long list of tasks suggests a life of continuous labor, yet it also reveals the strength of the mother figure. Despite the overwhelming demands placed upon her, she endures. The poem highlights the unacknowledged toil of women, particularly mothers, in their daily lives.

Angelou contrasts this depiction of physical labor with a moment of yearning for personal freedom: “Fall gently, snowflakes / Cover me with white / Cold icy kisses and / Let me rest tonight...” (Angelou, 1994: 241). Here, the mother expresses a desire for rest, revealing her vulnerability amidst her strength. This juxtaposition of labor and longing encapsulates the emotional complexity of motherhood, where personal needs are often sacrificed for the well-being of others.

The mother figure in Maya Angelou’s poetry, the maternal image broadens even further in these additional excerpts, particularly emphasizing themes of empowerment, cultural return, and the maternal strength that transcends individual experience. Here’s an analysis of the mother’s portrayal in these new examples:

Mother as Protector and Moral Guide

In “I start no wars, raining poison / on cathedrals, melting Stars of David / into golden faucets” (Angelou, 1994: 37), the speaker reflects on the mother’s influence as a moral compass, one who has instilled values of peace and respect for life. This passage portrays the mother as a protective and guiding figure, someone who has shielded her child from moral corruption and violence. The imagery here contrasts acts of destruction—war, desecration of religious symbols, and inhumane cruelty—with the mother’s role in teaching restraint and ethical responsibility. The mother is shown to have endowed her son with the capacity for resistance against societal evils, positioning her as a force that counters destructive impulses with nurturing wisdom.

The concluding lines, “They say you took my manhood, Momma. / Come sit on my lap / and tell me, what do you want me to say / to them, just / before I annihilate / their ignorance?” (Angelou, 1994: 370), reveal the depth of the son’s bond with his mother. The assertion that society accuses the mother of “taking his manhood” speaks to the tension between traditional notions of masculinity and the softer, nurturing qualities associated with motherhood. However, instead of rejecting his mother’s influence, the son embraces it, seeking her counsel in moments of conflict. His desire to “annihilate their ignorance” implies that he has internalized his mother’s wisdom and strength, ready to challenge misconceptions imposed by a patriarchal society.

Mother as Shelter, Identity, and Return to Origins

In “The Mothering Blackness,” Angelou evokes powerful imagery of the mother as a place of return—a shelter, a sanctuary from the outside world. The repeated phrase, “She came home running,” (Angelou, 1994: 51) signifies the longing for the safety and comfort of the mother, particularly in times of alienation or despair. The mother here represents protection and unconditional acceptance, welcoming the speaker back from experiences of hardship and alienation. The use of the term “mothering blackness” suggests both a physical and symbolic return to roots—an embrace of African identity and the shared experience of Blackness. The lines “She came home blameless / black yet as Hagar’s daughter / tall as was Sheba’s daughter” (Angelou, 1994: 51) invoke biblical

and royal imagery. Hagar, a figure from the Bible, is often associated with resilience, survival, and exile, while the reference to Sheba suggests nobility and strength. Angelou positions the mother as a towering figure of strength and dignity, connected to ancestral lineage. This not only emphasizes the mother's protective qualities but also links her to a broader cultural and historical legacy. The mother's blackness is not just a personal identity but also a collective, cultural one that serves as a point of pride and solidarity in the face of external threats. The imagery of the "black arms waiting" and the "warm heart waiting" reinforces the theme of the mother as a figure of emotional refuge. She provides a place where the speaker can find solace, healing, and strength. The phrase "threats of northern winds die on the desert's face" (Angelou, 1994: 51) further highlights the mother's role as a shield, standing firm against external challenges and providing a protective barrier against the cold, harsh forces of the world.

Mother as Cultural and Emotional Anchor

In these examples, Angelou continues to present the mother as a multi-dimensional figure, emphasizing not only her nurturing and protective qualities but also her role in shaping identity, resilience, and moral integrity. The mother is depicted as a figure who provides emotional and cultural grounding, a source of both strength and refuge in times of internal or external conflict.

In "Son to Mother," the mother is the moral center who instills values that protect her child from the destructiveness of the world, while "The Mothering Blackness" portrays her as a place of return, of cultural pride, and of emotional healing. The mother's blackness, symbolic of identity, history, and shared struggle, is celebrated as a source of dignity and empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Maya Angelou's portrayal of motherhood is a profound and nuanced reflection of love, resilience, and cultural significance. Through her poetry, Angelou elevates the image of the mother from traditional notions of caregiving to a broader symbol of strength, moral guidance, and cultural pride. The mother is portrayed not only as a nurturer but also as a confidante, a guardian of identity, and a spiritual guide. Poems like "*Mothering Blackness*" and "*Woman Work*" encapsulate the complexities of motherhood, blending the personal experiences of African American women with broader historical and societal contexts. Angelou's work highlights how mothers embody both individual and collective resilience, standing as pillars of emotional support while also representing the struggles and triumphs of their communities. Her exploration transcends the domestic sphere, showing the mother as a powerful figure who navigates multiple roles—protecting, loving, and guiding, all while confronting the harsh realities of racial and gender oppression. Angelou's maternal figures are thus central to her depiction of womanhood, symbolizing the intersection of personal sacrifice and cultural endurance. By integrating both quantitative content analysis and deep qualitative insight, this paper has demonstrated the centrality of the maternal figure in Angelou's work. Whether through expressions of unconditional love or as symbols of cultural and spiritual identity, Angelou's mothers serve as enduring emblems of strength, continuity, and empowerment. The representation of motherhood in Angelou's poetry is a testament to the lasting impact of mothers on both individual lives and the collective consciousness of society.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Angellou, M. (1994). *The complete collected poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House.
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences. London; Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Bell, R. Q. (1979). Parent, child, and reciprocal influences. *American Psychologist*, 34 (10), 821-826. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.34.10.821>
- Glenn, E. (1994). Social constructions of mothering: A thematic overview. In: Glenn, E. N., Chang, G., & Forcey, L. R. (Eds.) *Mothering: Ideologies, experience, and agency* (pp. 1-29). New York: Routledge.
- Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- Ruddick, S. (1983). Maternal thinking. In: Trebilcot, J. (Ed.) *Mothering: Essays in feminist theory* (pp. 213-230). Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld.
- Woodward, K. (1997). Motherhood: Identities, meanings and myths. In: Woodward, K. (Ed.) *Identity and difference* (pp. 239-285). London; Thousand Oaks: Sage.