

**SELF-LEARNING  
MATERIAL**



# MA ENGLISH

**MEN 204 : GENDER AND LITERATURE**

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**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY MEGHALAYA**

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**MEN 204**  
**GENDER AND LITERATURE**

<b>Unit</b>	<b>Contents</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Terms</b> Three waves, suffrage, misogyny, gaze, feminine mystique, Ecriture feminism, phallo centricism, gynocriticism, queer, Idea of Masculinity
<b>2</b>	<b>Virginia Woolf:</b> Selection from A Room of One's Own (Chapter 1 - 3)
<b>3</b>	<b>E.M.Forster:</b> <i>Maurice</i>
<b>4</b>	<b>Maya Angelou:</b> "Caged Bird" , "Phenomenal Woman" <b>Kamala Das:</b> "The Dance of the Eunuchs"

**PAPER CODE: MEN 204**

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## MAYA ANGELOU: “CAGED BIRD” AND PHENOMENAL WOMAN”

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### OBJECTIVES

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In this chapter we will discuss two powerful poems by Maya Angelou – “Caged Bird” and “Phenomenal Woman” – both of which are a celebration of the idea of woman hood and liberty that a woman can acquire through faith and confidence in oneself.

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### MAYA ANGELOU-INTRODUCTION

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Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Annie Johnson) was not only a noted poet, playwright and academic, but a civil rights activist as well, whose works have repeatedly protested against the racial as well as gender based discriminations faced by women worldwide. Along with writing even autobiographies (all of which were bestsellers across nations) and three books of essays, she has also published several collections of poetry and countless articles. She even worked as a journalist in her younger days in Ghana and Egypt during the time the colonial powers were

withdrawing from Africa— known better as the ‘decolonization of Africa’. She has been called to speak in universities around America, as an academic, an author as well as an activist. Her work has continuously lent a voice to the African American people (especially women), and its culture. Like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, her books are seen as pieces of literature that has shaped the identity of the black community around America. Several times the authority has tried to ban her books but the global popularity of her works has made it impossible. Her autobiographies, where she talks about not only racial discrimination and financial deprivation, but gender based exploitation as well, have turned her into a messianic figure for the countless voiceless women around the world. Although she is known more for these autobiographies, her poems too, have contributed to shape the identity of the black women. She wrote poetry from a very young age. Some of her poems which have been published later, were written by her when she was working as a performer or singer in her early youth. Like her autobiographies, her poems too focus on nuances of issues like racism, oppression, identity and even human emotions, like love.

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#### MAYA ANGELOU: LIFE AND CAREER

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Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 4, 1928 to Bailey and Vivian Baxter Johnson. She spent her childhood in St. Louis and Stamps, Arkansas. The name “Maya” was given to her, by her brother Bailey Johnson, Jr. Angelou’s parents got separated when she was only three and a half years old. Then she and her brother were sent to Stamps, Arkansas, where their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, used to live. Angelou writes about her days in Arkansas in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which describes at a time in Arkansas when segregation was rampant in the place. The book covers till the time she was seventeen and had become a mother to a son.

In Arkansas she attended the Lafayette County training school. After graduating from there she moved to San Francisco with her brother and attended high school there. She was a bright student and was given a two year scholarship to learn dance and drama at the California Labor School. But she could not make much use of the scholarship since in 1944 she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. Angelou had worked many odd jobs while she was growing up, including that of a cook, a waitress, a performer and even a conductor. She got married in the early 1950s to a man named Tosh Angelos, who was a Greek sailor she met in San Francisco. Her surname “Angelou” is a derivation of her husband’s surname. She moved to the New York City after her marriage with Tosh ended, sometime during the late ’50s. It was also

the time that she became engaged in the political and literary milieu of New York. In 1959 Angelou became the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. She worked extensively as a journalist around the world in the following years: from 1961 to 1962 she worked as the associate editor of “The Arab Observer” in Cairo, Egypt, which was the lone English-language news weekly in the Middle East; then, from 1964 to 1966 she was appointed the feature editor of the “African Review” in Accra, Ghana. Upon her return to the U.S she was chosen by Gerald Ford to the Bicentennial Commission and later by Jimmy Carter to the Commission for International Woman of the Year. But her return to U.S. was marked by two gruesome incidents which left deep impact on her— one was the assassination of Malcom X on February 21, 1965, and the other was the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. In 1971, her collection of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die*, got nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. In 1981, she received a lifetime appointment at Wake Forest University in Winston- Salem, North Carolina, as Reynolds Professor of American Studies. She has also left an impression as a script writer, producer and director working for stage, film, and television. In 1971, she wrote the original screenplay and musical score for the film *Georgia, Georgia*, and thus became the first African American woman to have a screenplay produced. Along with all these she has made hundreds of stage and television appearances and has been nominated twice for a Tony award for acting: once for her Broadway debut in *Look Away* (1973), and again for her performance in *Roots* (1977). She was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama in the year 2011. In 2013 she wrote, what was going to be, her last autobiography *Mom and Me and Mom*, which revolves around her relationship with her mother. Angelou died on the morning of May 28, 2014 after suffering a long phase of illness.

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## MAJOR WORKS

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### Autobiographies

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)

*Gather Together in My Name* (1974).

*Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976).

*The Heart of a Woman* (1981)

*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986)

*A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002)

*Mom & Me & Mom* (2013) Poetry:

*Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971)

*Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975)

*And Still I Rise* (1978)

*Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (1983)

*Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987)

*I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990).

*A Brave and Startling Truth* (1995)

*Poetry for Young People* (2007)

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#### A NOTE ON ANGELOU'S POETRY

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Angelou, despite being better known as a prose writer, has also been a prolific poet. She has published several volumes of poetry, and has experienced similar success as a poet. She has written as many as eight volumes of poetry many of which have been best sellers. She used writing poetry as a means to cope with the trauma that she went through in her childhood. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* she writes how reciting and writing poems had helped her come out of the silence that she had entailed upon herself. In her early youth she had taken up singing to earn her bread, and although she quit singing for her writing career, music always had a deep impact on her writing, especially in her poetry. Many critics have found her poetry to be configured like blues music. Harold Bloom writes about the impact of blues in her poems in the following words—

In fact, a close reading and analysis of Angelou's poems suggest that a blues-based model may provide an instrument for examining the variety of subjects, style, themes, and use of vernacular in Angelou's poems. The name "blues" has been bestowed on a style of songs with themes and feelings of being "blue" or sad. African-American blues music ordinarily



reflects unhappiness that ranges from minor irritations to great suffering. The blues singer achieves control of his emotions that seem to be self-defeating by using laughter or ridicule instead of tears to cope with his immediate contingencies. Angelou uses this same technique in this poem, as she does in much of her other poetry.

Like racism, freedom and identity, love and relationships are also central themes of many of Angelou's poems. Most of the poems in the first part of *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* focus on the ideas of love. Most of the poems in *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* also focus on love and its loss, and the ensuing feeling of dejection and despair that plague the psyche as a consequence. Critic Lynn Z. Bloom writes—

Angelou's poetry becomes far more interesting when she dramatizes it in her characteristically dynamic stage performances. Angelou's statuesque figure, dressed in bright colors (and sometimes, African designs), moves exuberantly, vigorously to reinforce the rhythm of the lines, the tone of the words. Her singing and dancing and electrifying stage presence transcend the predictable words and rhymes.

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#### ANALYSIS: CAGED BIRD

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"Caged Bird" was published in Maya Angelou's 1983 poetry collection *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* The poem describes the opposing experiences between two birds: one bird is able to live in nature as it pleases, while a different caged bird suffers in captivity. The latter bird sings both to cope with its circumstances and to express its own longing for freedom. Using the extended metaphor of these two birds, Angelou paints a critical portrait of oppression in which she illuminates the privilege and entitlement of the un-oppressed, and conveys the simultaneous experience of suffering and emotional resilience. In particular, the poem's extended metaphor can be seen as portraying the experience of being a Black person in America. The poem describes a "caged bird"—a bird that is trapped in a "narrow cage" with limited mobility, only able to sing about the freedom it has never had and cannot attain. This caged bird is an extended metaphor for the Black community's past and ongoing experience of racism in the United States in particular, and can also be read as portraying the experience of any oppressed group. The metaphor captures the overwhelming agony and cruelty of the

oppression of marginalized communities by relating it to the emotional suffering of the caged bird.

The poem uses the metaphor of the bird to capture not just the way that oppression imposes overt physical limitations on the oppressed, but also the way that those limitations emotionally and psychologically impact the oppressed. For instance, in lines 10-11 the poem states that the caged bird "can seldom see through his bars," which seems at first as if the poem is going to explain how being in the cage limits the bird's line of sight. But instead, the poem further describes the bars as being "bars of rage"—the bird is imprisoned and certainly the physical bars of the cage limit its line of sight, but the bird can "seldom see" because these conditions make the bird *blind with rage*. By fusing the limits imposed by the cage with the emotional impact those limits inspire, the poem makes clear that the environment and the anger can't be separated from one another. The oppression of the cage doesn't just keep the bird captive; the captivity *changes* the bird, and in so doing robs the bird of its very self.

As an extended metaphor used to convey the pain of the oppression faced by Black people throughout (and before) the history of the United States, aspects of the poem can be read as directly related to that particular experience. For instance, the caged bird's song can be seen as an allusion to Black spirituals. As abolitionist Frederick Douglass once said, "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy." Additionally, Angelou's image of the "caged bird" is one borrowed from a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy," which states, "I know why the caged bird sings, ah me [...] / it is not a carol of joy or glee [...]" What both Dunbar and Douglass are saying is that the oppressed sing not because they are happy, but because they are *unhappy*. The cause of the caged bird's song explicitly mirrors Douglass and Dunbar's insights: though the song is full of the hope of freedom, the fact that the caged bird can only hope of freedom makes clear that it *lacks* that freedom. The song may be full of hope, but it is born from a place of deep pain, and the hope can be seen as primarily an attempt to cope with an intolerable situation.

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#### ANALYSIS: PHENOMENAL WOMAN

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"Phenomenal Woman" is a poem by Maya Angelou, first published in 1978. The poem rejects narrow societal expectations of women and proposes an alternative perspective on

what defines real beauty. Confidence and comfort in one's own skin, the speaker insists, are the markers of true beauty.

The speaker refers to an elusive "secret" about herself that conventionally attractive women struggle to understand. She explains that she doesn't look like the models glorified by the fashion industry, and that when she starts to reveal her secret these other women don't believe her. The speaker claims that her beauty is manifested in her wide hips, her confident gait, and her smile. She's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

Whenever the speaker calmly walks into a room, every single man present desperately competes for her attention. These men are drawn to the speaker, buzzing around her like honey bees. This is because her passion for life manifests in her physical appearance—in her flashing eyes, her vibrant smile, the way her waist sways as she walks, and the happy lightness in her step. She again declares that she's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

Men have also asked themselves what it is about the speaker that makes her so attractive. But no matter how hard they try to pin down the speaker's mysterious appeal, they can't come close. Even when she tries to reveal her secret to these men, they just don't get it. The speaker says that her beauty exists in the way she carries herself—in her confident posture; her bright, sunny smile; the shape of her breasts; and her elegant style. She's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

This, the speaker says, is why she insists on moving throughout the world confidently and boldly. She doesn't have to overcompensate in any way or prove herself to anyone. In fact, when other women see the speaker, they should be inspired to be more confident themselves. The speaker's appeal exists in the way she struts in heels, in the way her hair falls, in the way she holds out her hands, in the way others want her to care for them. She's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

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## LET US SUM UP

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From this unit, we learnt about Maya Angelou, who is regarded as a significant feminist voice. Maya Angelou, not only explores the themes of gender issues but also explores on

areas such as racism and societal inequality. She uses poetry as a tool to represent her ideas on feminism and calls for equality of women.

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#### MODEL QUESTIONS

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1. Write an essay on Maya Angelou, her life and works.
2. Critically discuss the poem “Caged Bird” from the perspective of gender
3. Write a critical appreciation of the poem “Phenomenal Woman”

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#### SUGGESTED READINGS

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Doherty, Patricia. *Marge Piercy: an annotated bibliography*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997. Print.

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Walker, Sue and Eugenie Hamner. *Ways of Knowing: Essays on Marge Piercy*. Mobile, Alabama: Negative Capability Press, 1991. Print.

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