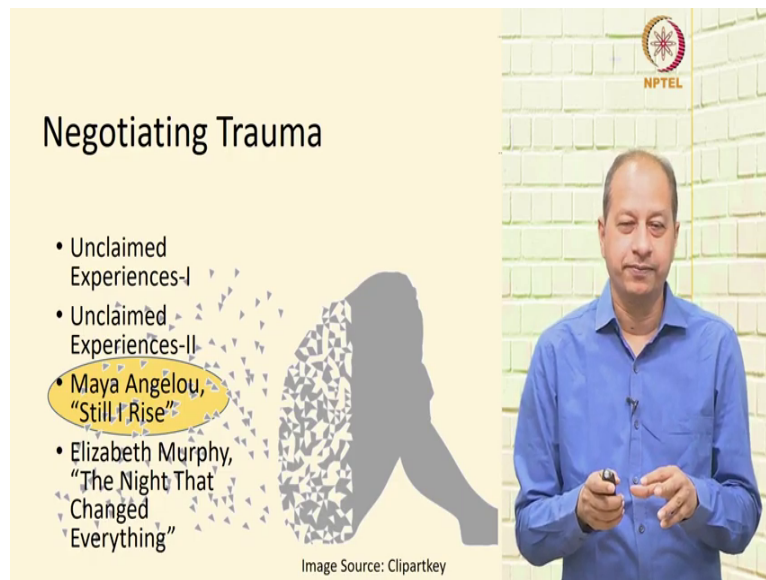


**Literature and Coping Skills**  
**Professor Ajit K Mishra**  
**Department of Humanistic Studies**  
**Indian Institute of Technology (BHU) Varanasi**  
**Lecture 27**

**Maya Angelou, “Still I Rise”**

Hello everybody, I am Ajit K. Mishra, your course instructor for Literature and Coping Skills. I am here again with another lecture on the segment that we are currently doing. The segment is on negotiating trauma. In my last two lectures I talked about how it's very, very important for each one of us to know what trauma is all about, so that we can negotiate our traumatic experiences well and ensure our return to our life and our subjective well-being.

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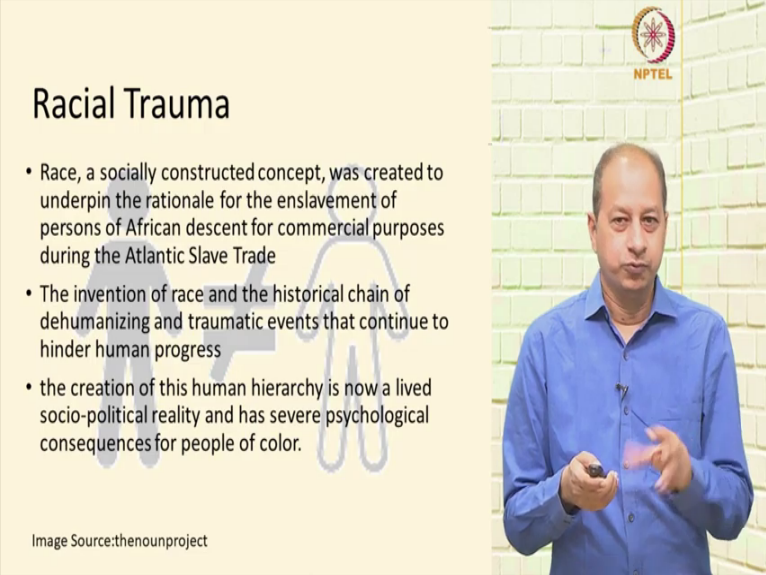


So, today I am going to talk about very different kind of trauma and then I will walk you through the idea of Maya Angelou's, “Still I Rise” and then towards the end of this lecture I will tell you how Maya Angelou as a speaker is able to cope with the disasters, the traumatic experiences that she had. So, let us take a look at each of these elements. So, in this lecture as I have just told you all that I am going to talk about Maya Angelou's, “Still I Rise”, but before I do so I will walk you through the idea of a different kind of trauma. Hello everybody, I am Ajit K. Mishra your course instructor for Literature and Coping Skills. I am here again with another lecture on this module that is negotiating trauma. In my last two lectures I talked about how trauma affects our

existence, our well being severely and how we all need to be aware of its devastating properties so that we can take care of it, so that we can negotiate with it to return to life and negotiate our subjective well-being as well.

Today I am going to walk you through the idea of racial and historical trauma with the help of Maya Angelou's, "Still I Rise". And I am also going to show you how the speaker in that poetic composition finally helps us develop certain skills and certain coping strategies for instances of racial or historical trauma. So, let us take a look at those elements.

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The slide features a light yellow background with a faint blue silhouette of a person. The title 'Racial Trauma' is positioned at the top left. Below it, three bullet points are listed. On the right side, there is a video inset showing a man in a blue shirt speaking. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the slide area.

## Racial Trauma

- Race, a socially constructed concept, was created to underpin the rationale for the enslavement of persons of African descent for commercial purposes during the Atlantic Slave Trade
- The invention of race and the historical chain of dehumanizing and traumatic events that continue to hinder human progress
- the creation of this human hierarchy is now a lived socio-political reality and has severe psychological consequences for people of color.

Image Source: [thenounproject](#)

So, racial trauma is a very different kind of trauma. Interestingly enough the world was not awake to this particular kind of trauma. It is only towards the end of the 90's and at the beginning of this century, the new century that researchers directed their focus towards this particular problem. So, until that point people used to look at racial trauma from the perspective of historical trauma, but there was a need to separate a racial trauma from historical trauma which is in fact far more impulsive than this one.

And which in fact makes it impossible for researchers to focus on this particular aspect of trauma. So, racial trauma is in fact really closely associated with the idea of race, which is a socially constructed concept we all know and it was in fact created to underpin the rationale, the


logic, that enslavement is necessary. The enslavement of the persons of African descent is necessary, and then it was necessary because of the Atlantic Slave Trade, so, that particular rationale escapes our reasoning or any give and take but that was in place for a long, long time and that was the beginning of this particular type of trauma. So, the invention of race, it was in fact an invention, it is an ideological invention and the historical chain of dehumanizing and traumatic events that continue to hinder human progress is something that we all need to direct our attention towards.

So, this has turned out to be a racial cycle. So, and this, the creation of this human hierarchy in which the whites are privileged, the people with different skin colors are not that privileged, and this hierarchy is of course now a lived sociopolitical reality and continues to haunt us, continues to disturb us, cause a lot of distress to us and continues to give us severe psychological problems all through.

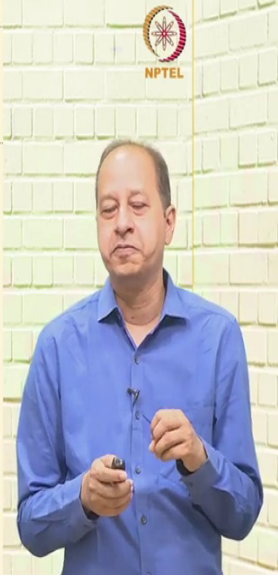
So, it happens to all those people of color, except the whites who are privileged. So, this is exactly the idea with which we can direct our attention towards so that we can locate the beginning of historical or racial trauma. So, the trauma of racism refers to the cumulative negative impact of racial practices on the lives of people of color as I told you. Encompassing the emotional psychological health, social and economic effects of multi generational and historical trauma, trauma of racism relates to the damaging effects of the ongoing societal and intra-social group, racial micro aggressions, internalized racism, overt racist experiences, discrimination and oppression within the lives of the people of color.

So, it is all pervasive. It has been historically pervasive in fact. It has entered all aspects of our existence. So, if somebody is a person of color then the person is or has been subjected to such traumatic experiences. So, racial trauma is everywhere, it is all pervasive.

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- Hugh Butts (2002) was the first to draw attention to what we now call racial trauma, or race-based trauma, in the mental health literature.
- Racial trauma, or race-based stress, refers to the physical and psychological symptoms that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) experience after exposure to particularly distressing and/or life-threatening racist experiences
- These Traumatic experiences can be real or perceived, directly experienced or witnessed, interpersonal or systemic
- The effects of racial trauma can be passed down within communities and across generations



Hugh Butts was the first to draw our attention to what we now call racial trauma, that is the reason why I told you that at the turn of this century our people, researchers in fact directed their attention towards this particular aspect of trauma, racial trauma and race-based trauma, and the impact of such traumatic experiences in mental health literature.

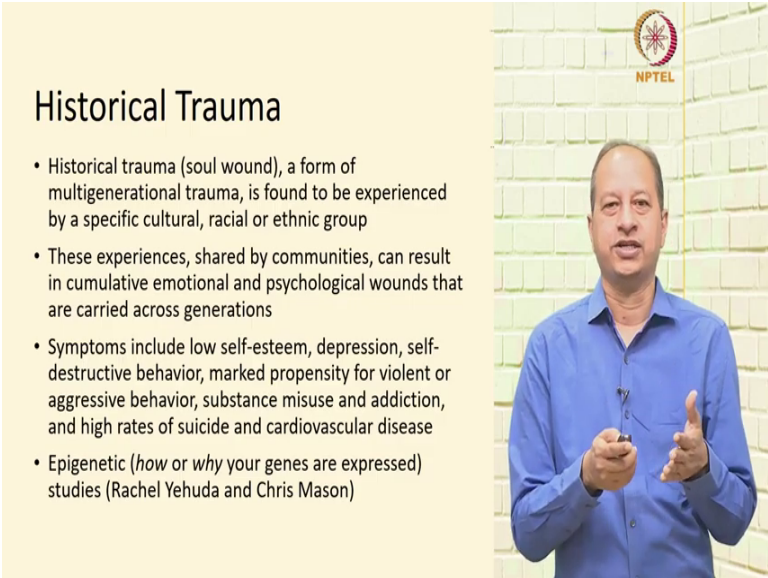
Until that point people used to approach race based trauma through the lens of historical trauma only. Racial trauma or race-based trauma as I have already told you all is a physical, psychological symptom that black, indigenous and people of color experience after exposure to particularly distressing, life threatening, racist experiences. The only difference between the other kind of trauma and this particular kind of specific trauma that is race based trauma is this. So, one needs to be exposed to racist experiences in order to experience racist or racial trauma.

So, these traumatic experiences can be real or perceived. So, it can be directly experienced or it can also be witnessed. You may not be the victim but you may witness a traumatic experience being experienced by somebody else, a person of color. So, it can be interpersonal or systemic. In most cases it is systemic rather than personal.

So, the effects of racial trauma actually passes down within communities and across generations, now that's one of the most important aspects of racial trauma that it is not restricted to one

particular generation only, it becomes intergenerational. Therefore it derives historical properties. It turns out to be a historical trauma, and that in fact requires that we focus on this particular aspect of racial trauma.

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The slide features a yellow background. On the left, the title 'Historical Trauma' is displayed in a large, dark font. Below the title is a bulleted list of four points. On the right side of the slide, there is a video inset showing a man in a blue shirt speaking, with the NPTEL logo in the top right corner of the video frame.

## Historical Trauma

- Historical trauma (soul wound), a form of multigenerational trauma, is found to be experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group
- These experiences, shared by communities, can result in cumulative emotional and psychological wounds that are carried across generations
- Symptoms include low self-esteem, depression, self-destructive behavior, marked propensity for violent or aggressive behavior, substance misuse and addiction, and high rates of suicide and cardiovascular disease
- Epigenetic (*how or why* your genes are expressed) studies (Rachel Yehuda and Chris Mason)

So, that brings us to the idea of historical trauma. Historical trauma is otherwise called soul wound, in which the soul is wounded over a period of time, over decades, over centuries, so the soul is rendered permanently wounded and that makes it very, very difficult for persons who experience historical trauma to cope with this particular kind of traumatic experience.

So, it is a form of multi generation trauma because it passes from one generation to the other and then generation after generation experiences this particular kind of trauma and this is experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group, it can be blacks, it can be the browns, it can be the Hispanics. So, people of a specific culture, racial or ethnic group actually experience such kind of trauma.

These experiences, which are shared by communities actually result in cumulative emotional and psychological wounds that are carried across generations. So, these experiences, these painful experiences get accumulated over a certain period of time and then when it is passed to the next generation it leaves a severe impact on the psyche of that or the psychological shaping of that

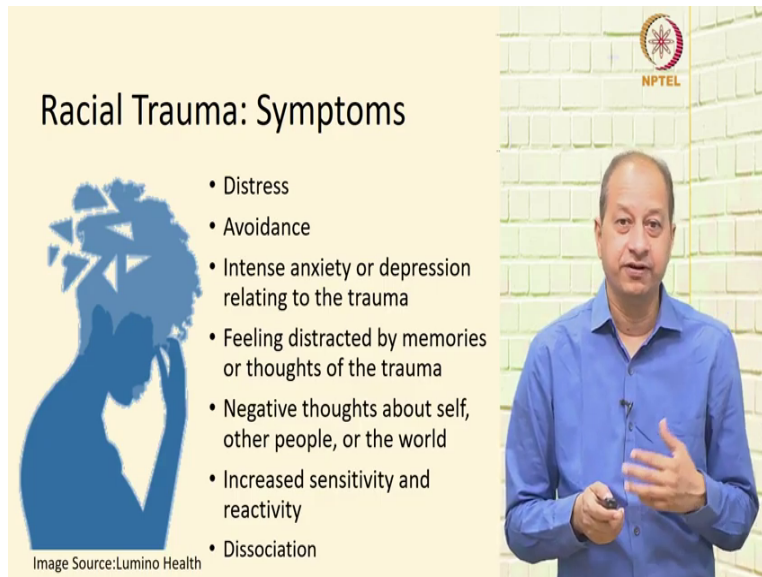
particular generation. Even if that generation has not experienced similar traumatic events or have not been exposed to the similar traumatic events they still experience the same pain and suffering.

Historical trauma has certain symptoms that start with low self-esteem because you are historically excluded. You do not have a history, even if your history is so miniature, it is so ignore-able that you do not want to identify with your history. So, you want to deny the history and you, the only history that you have is a history of pain and suffering, is a history of oppression, so that leads to low self-esteem, depression, self destructive behavior including suicide, marked propensity for violent or aggressive behavior because that is how you vent your anger and frustration and then substance misuse and addiction, because you would like to forget the pangs of historical trauma and then finally high rates of suicide and cardiovascular disease.

So, in a way this particular kind of trauma has both physiological and psychological impacts. Therefore, this is a very, very important type of trauma towards which we all need to direct our attention. And then this particular interesting thing is also generally associated with historical trauma but this is very new concept, these epigenetic studies being conducted by Rachel Yehuda and Chris Mason established the fact that epigenesis plays a very, very important role in the passing of these traumatic experiences from one generation to the other generation.

So, one generation that is exposed to traumatic events or experiences will differently pass these, the traces, the residues of that particular experience to the next generations and the genetic framework, the coding of that particular generation will be altered because of the experiences of this particular generation. So, although Yehuda and Mason are very, very cautious while saying that there is no need to jump into any conclusion right now but they are preliminary researchers to have established the fact that epigenesis plays an important role in the passing of traumatic experiences from one generation to another.

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The slide is titled "Racial Trauma: Symptoms" and features a list of seven symptoms. To the left of the list is a blue silhouette of a person's head and shoulders, with a crown of thorns on their head. To the right is a photograph of a man in a blue shirt speaking. The NPTEL logo is in the top right corner. The source "Image Source: Lumino Health" is at the bottom left.

### Racial Trauma: Symptoms

- Distress
- Avoidance
- Intense anxiety or depression relating to the trauma
- Feeling distracted by memories or thoughts of the trauma
- Negative thoughts about self, other people, or the world
- Increased sensitivity and reactivity
- Dissociation

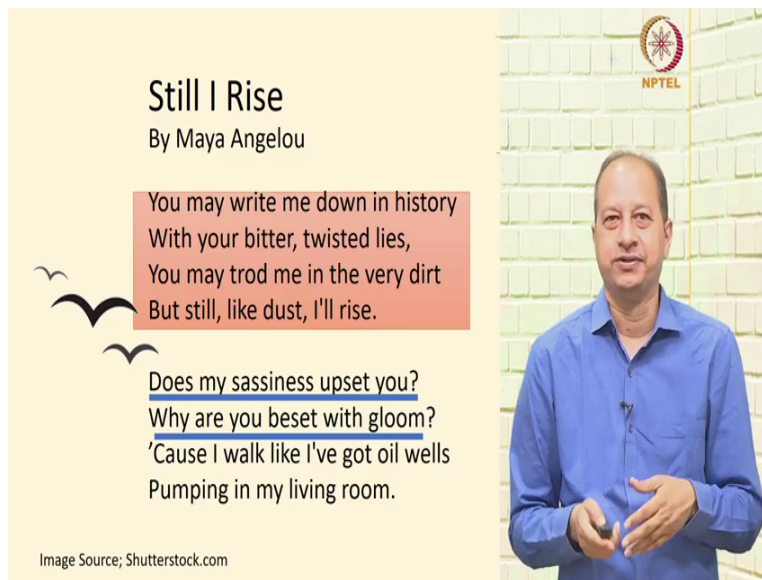
Image Source: Lumino Health

So, that brings us to the question of racial trauma and its related symptoms. So, if we take a look at the symptoms that people experiencing racial trauma go through, we will find a lot of similarities between racial trauma and PTSD. So, distress, disturbing images, thoughts, numbing are some of the experiences that you experience if you are experiencing a racial trauma. Avoidance, you try to avoid people who remind you of those traumatic experiences. There are occasions when people even avoid themselves. They get depersonalized or they experience de-realization as well, so that leads to intense anxiety or depression relating to that particular traumatic event. So, anxiety and depression are also the symptoms of racial trauma. And then people who experience racial trauma are severely distracted by memories or thoughts of that particular trauma. So, they cannot concentrate, they live on the edge, which is very, very similar to that of those people who experience either acute stress disorder or PTSD.

And then negative thoughts about self. People begin to blame themselves by saying they are indeed the ones who do not deserve to exist on this earth. Since they are born with a different skin color, they do not deserve to be a part of this world. So, self-blaming, self-hatred and negative thoughts about the self and even about people around you are very, very common in this kind of trauma and then finally increased sensitivity and reactivity.

So, since you begin to experience that startle thing you become extremely reactive or sensitive towards things. You easily lose your cool, you become aggressive, angry, frustrated, there are people who begin to cry, sob, wail and they also become extremely reactive to the revisiting, even rethinking of such traumatic experiences. And then finally dissociation also sets in and it results in de-personalization in which you are completely dissociated from yourself and then de-realization in which you find everything around you to be unreal. So, dissociation is also a major symptom of racial trauma.

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**Still I Rise**  
By Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Image Source: Shutterstock.com

NPTEL

So, with that in mind I can now walk you through “Still I Rise”. A wonderful poetic composition by Maya Angelou. So, the writer is of the African decent and she is the one who has had the first hand experience of being exposed to racial trauma, multi generational trauma and historical trauma and that’s the reason why she is so close to experiencing, realizing and talking about such experiences.

And this particular poetic composition in fact gives us a wonderful insight into the world of how a person of color or a black person feels about the historical oppression, the historical subjection or exclusion that one has gone through. And this is exactly where you will also get to see how epigenetic traits play a very important role. So, let us take a look at this particular poetic composition. So, when we start with this, now it starts with a sense of affirmation. The



affirmation is that despite everything I will rise. So, the title of this poetry composition is “Still I Rise” that means despite everything else I rise, come what may I rise.

So, this is a wonderful thing because there is an emphasis on the idea of rising, not falling. Despite being pushed to the fringes, the margins. Despite being neglected, ignored historically, despite all sorts of operations this speaker wants to or has decided to rise, and that is exactly what is at the core of this particular poetic composition. So, the very first line in fact directs our attention towards the presence of historical trauma. So, “You may write me down in history” so we are a community, we are a group that has been written down in history, that has been historically oppressed, neglected and written down; so that is a reality and there is no harm in accepting the reality that this community has been historically neglected and excluded or written down and the speaker does exactly that and says that you have written us down in history, so that is an instance of historical trauma, the very realization of historical or multi-generational trauma. And how has that happened? With bitter lies and twisted truths that have happened. And then that has also happened when people who are privileged have pushed or trod these people of color in the very dirt.

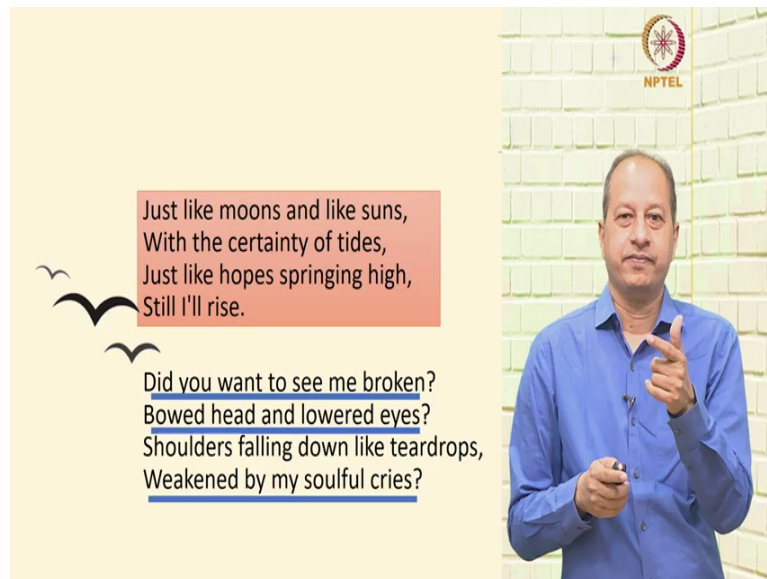
But despite all these things the speaker decides that he or she will rise. So, as we walk along with the speaker, we want to feel like he has. Whenever there are problems that shake our mental well-being, we can also think of rising. So, we are gradually going through the coping skills. So, rising is a huge positive imagery that the speaker creates. So, that is a coping skill. So, thinking about something that will help you rise so that is exactly what the speaker does in the very first segment.

And then the speaker tries to play down the perpetrators of that historical or multi-generational trauma or racial trauma. So, we can use them alternatively, racial trauma, intergenerational, multi-generational trauma or even historical trauma. So, does my sassiness upset you?” Why are you so upset? Now, that is a classic example of downsizing or down playing. You are downplaying your enemy. The perpetrator of your trauma. So, you begin by downplaying and downsizing.

If you remember while discussing Death Be Not Proud I hinted at this particular coping strategy that is downsizing. So, until and unless you downsize your enemy it will be very difficult for you to manage the onslaught that has been launched by that enemy. So, the speaker does that here as well. Why are you so upset? “Why are you so beset with gloom?” why are you so sad, melancholic, so beset with gloom? Is it because I have this particular thing. Are you jealous of my possessions? Are you jealous of the things that I have? Why are you so upset, why are you so sad.

So, by questioning the perpetrator the speaker is in fact trying to downplay the power or the impact of the perpetrator. So, unless that happens the speaker will not begin to feel powerful or empowered. So, this is one empowerment strategy that the speaker uses here. In order to make oneself feel powerful. In order to feel that it is possible the speakers use this particular coping strategy.

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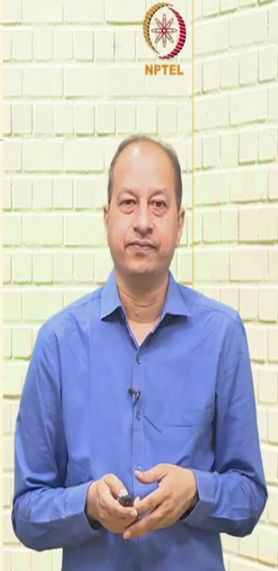
Let us move to the next segment. Just like the moons, like the suns with the certainty of tides all these things rise. So, they never get stuck at one particular condition. So, the moons rise, the sun rises, the tides also rise. Similarly the speaker also decides that I would also rise. So, by creating these wonderful analogies, natural analogies the speaker in fact wants to make it a natural

process, that rising is in my nature. You might have made me fall, you might have pushed me to the dirt but rising is very much in my nature.

If falling is in my nature, similarly rising is also in my nature. So, I will rise- so that is exactly what the speaker says here. And then a set of questions like the previous pattern. Again a set of questions to downplay or downsize. Did you want to see me broken?” so that you can feel powerful? But that is not happening. With “Bowed head and lowered eyes?” Did you paint my picture in this way? But that is not happening. My eyes are not lowered, my head is not bowed. My shoulder is not drooped. That is not the kind of picture I will present before you- so that you can paint me in that manner. I will not give you that opportunity. So, the falling shoulders will not be visible to you. So, I am also weakened by my soulful cries, do you also want me to cry? That is not happening. So, this series of questions in fact try to downplay the power of the perpetrator. I am not broken, my shoulders are not down or falling down like teardrops. My head is now bowed, my eyes are not lowered and I am not giving any soulful cries. I am not crying, I am not sobbing.

If these things do not happen, what will the perpetrator do? The perpetrator will feel powerless because the perpetrator has been feeling powerful only when or because the perpetrated, the victims have been showing these symptoms, these signs. And that is the reason why the perpetrator has been feeling powerful. But the speaker here decides that I will not allow the perpetrator to continue to feel powerful. I will downplay, I will downsize. And then we come to the next segment.

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Does my haughtiness offend you?  
 Don't you take it awful hard  
 'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
 Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
 You may cut me with your eyes,  
 You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
 But still, like air, I'll rise.

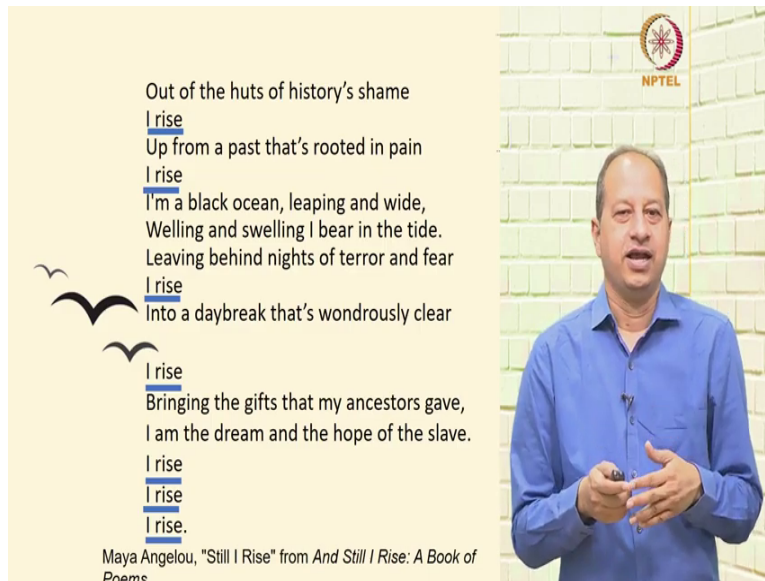
Does my sexiness upset you?  
 Does it come as a surprise  
 That I dance like I've got diamonds  
 At the meeting of my thighs?

Again a set of questions, “Does my haughtiness offend you? Do not you take it awful hard 'cause I laugh like I have got gold mines diggin in my own backyard.’` Do you not like it that I laugh? I can also be happy. I deserve to be happy. Does my haughtiness offend you? Do you feel offended? Therefore this aggression? So, there is no need for you to feel offended. Then we will go to the questions first. “Does my sexiness upset you? Does it come as a surprise that I dance like I have got diamonds at the meeting of my thighs?” So, what exactly are you upset with?

So, the speaker proves that the perpetrator is upset with something. The perpetrator would not like this to happen. If this happens the perpetrator will be upset and this is a coping strategy adopted by the speaker here. The coping strategy is to keep the perpetrator upset or in a state of upset. So, that feeling of power will gradually vanish, disappear, and the speaker will gradually become empowered; so that is exactly what the speaker does and then “You may shoot me with your words” that is exactly how psychological trauma also happens. We do not have to actually physically shoot somebody. We can shoot somebody mentally through or with the help of words and we can devastate that person. You may cut me with your eyes the kind of gaze that these privileged people have given to the underprivileged and unprivileged ones. The oppressed class and communities. You may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I will rise” so rising again said.

So, the speaker does not allow himself or herself to be separated from that particular image, image of rising. So, rising is everywhere. It gets repeated every time the speaker thinks about those strategies which were employed by the oppressors to fix the oppressed. All those strategies like shooting with words, hating or killing with hatefulness or cutting people with their eyes, the gaze, and then we come to the final segment of this poem.

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Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" from *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*

Where she says or when the speaker says “Out of the huts of history's shame” we have been historically shamed. That means we have been historically excluded. So, she is again pointing towards historical trauma. This historical trauma which has caused a lot of suffering to multiple generations and that has been going on for generations altogether. “Out of the huts of history's shame” we have had a very small history and a minimized ignore-able history. Therefore the hut image.


“The huts of history's shame I rise. Up from a past that is rooted in pain, I rise” the past, again this multi-generational trauma or historical trauma racial trauma and then I am this, I am that, the acceptance, the reclaiming. So, this reclaiming plays an extremely important role here, because that is a very important coping skill. You reclaim that.

So, “I am a black ocean leaping and wide, welling and swelling I bear in the tide. Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise” so then there is a series of I rise that we come across as we move forth. And it ends with three times I rise, repetition. So, but before that bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave and I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

Now, this wonderful pointing towards the future, time perspective, future. I cannot change what has happened. I cannot change what is happening but I can surely change what will happen. So,

how can I change that? I can change that with these particular strategies- so that I am not taken as a victim, I am not captured, I am not trapped in that vicious cycle of racial trauma or historical trauma or multi-generational trauma and that is how the speaker in fact pronounces that I rise, I rise, I rise.

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The slide features a yellow background. On the left, there is a stylized line-art icon of a person with arms raised. To the right of the icon is a bulleted list of coping skills. Further right is a photograph of a man in a blue shirt speaking. The NPTEL logo is in the top right corner of the slide area.

## Coping Skills & Strategies

- Healing Sentences
- Community healing
- Reclaiming
- Remembering and Re-membering
- Downsizing
- Repeated Positive Imagery

Image Source: Flaticon

So, I will take you through the coping skills and strategies that are employed in this particular poetic composition. The first most important coping skill that is employed here is that of healing sentences or healing words. We all know that words are extremely powerful. So, when we use words in a certain manner they in fact get glued to our mindset, our psychological setup. So, if somebody says I am going to fall, I am going to fall, I am going to fall, the person will fall of course.

If somebody says I am going to rise, I am going to rise, I am going to succeed, the person will succeed and rise- so that is the power of words or the healing power of sentences or words, that is exactly what the speakers use here, implies here. That particular skill- so that is an instance of unconscious reliving. So, this unconscious reliving can go on for generations. That means the speaker or persons can relive the same kind of traumatic experiences in time to come. So, therefore it is very, very important that those traumatic experiences are not relived.

So, when that happens, when people recognize that they have been carrying thoughts, emotions, feelings and behaviors or even symptoms that do not originate with them, that originated elsewhere with somebody else- so that is the reason why we need to get rid of this reliving experience of racial trauma, and that is exactly what the speaker does here.

Through the use of healing sentences. There are sentences that heal you, that does not kill you. There are so many expressions, like suns, like moons, like air, like dust, so many healing sentences. I will rise, I will rise. Those are healing sentences. If somebody has broken a limb, somebody has got a fracture or a fractured leg, the person has to say, the person has to use healing sentences or healing expressions so that one can quickly recover.

So, the power of healing expressions or healing sentences is known, is well known and that is exactly what the speaker does here, and then there is something else that the speaker wants to employ, that is community healing. Apart from using healing expressions or healing sentences the speaker also uses community healing or explores the power of community healing. And how does she do that? If you remember when she talks about her ancestors, the gift of the ancestors.

The trauma may be the gift, but we generally do not call a painful object or a painful thing a gift. So, she was also talking about the positive, adaptive aspects of that particular painful experience, because the trauma tells you that you need to adapt to the challenges it poses to you. Therefore, she calls it a gift of the ancestors and the dream, the hope of the slave. So, she or he, I mean the speaker tries to reconnect to the vibrant strengths of the ancestry and culture. Therefore the speaker says I am a black ocean, the culture, the speaker tries to find strength in the culture. That is community healing.

So, this helps people process their grief and past traumas. They also create a new historical narrative which can have healing effects for those experiencing historical trauma. This is exactly what happens in the poetic composition. So, community healing is also being practiced. That brings us to the third idea that is reclaiming. I have already told you that she reclaims, yes, I am a black. I have been traumatized but that is not a permanent or a fixed feature of my existence.




I have been traumatized, I have been oppressed. I have been made to suffer, but I will rise from this particular state. I will rise and I will leave this particular state behind me when I rise. So, reclaiming is another coping skill that the person uses here. And then remembering and re-remembering. When it comes to historical trauma, remembering plays an important role. I have already told you that trauma is more about forgetting problems than remembering problems. So, there is no problem with remembering because remembering can also lead to re-remembering.

So, remembering has this potential to re-member, that is reorganize or rejoin the otherwise disorganized or disjointed psychological state, so that is exactly what the speaker does here. By remembering how it has been a historical shame. How it has been a historical exclusion. How it has been an instance of being pushed to the dirt and several other things. So, by remembering the speaker tries to re-member the broken or the fragmented psychological states. So, this is also a very important coping skill that we get across. Downsizing or downplaying is a very, very important coping skill that has been employed by the speaker here.

Because until and unless we downsize and downplay the importance, the power of the enemy, the perpetrator, we cannot do that. If somebody continues to believe that the perpetrator is still very powerful. The person will always be in a state of traumatized experiences or a traumatized state. Therefore, downplaying helps. And this is one of the most important coping skills that the speaker uses in this poetic composition, repeated positive imagery. We all know the power of repetition. I think I can, I think I can. So, positive thinking, I think I can, I think I can. So, you can actually do that.

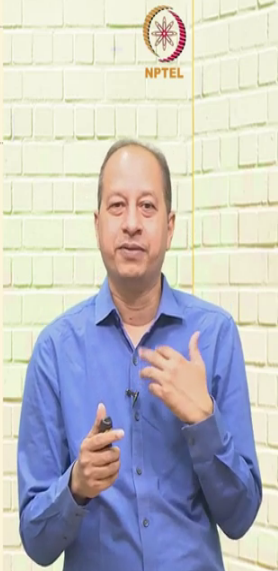
So, that is the power of positive thinking. Positive repetition which the speaker employs here quite convincingly, quite effectively, repeated positive imagery and what is that imagery? The imagery of rising, not falling. One is in a falling state yet the person believes that he or she will rise and then finally one final pronouncement that yes, I rise, I rise, I rise. So, this rising imagery which turns out to be a positive imagery helps the speaker cope with this kind of trauma.

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So, with that we come to the end of this lecture. I hope it has helped you understand a very different type of trauma that is racial or historical or multi-generational trauma and you have been able to focus on the coping skills and strategies that the speaker in “Still I Rise” uses in order to overcome the impact of that particular kind of trauma. So, thank you very much for joining me.