
Maya Angelou as new woman reading through her autobiographies

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Abstract: Maya Angelou a forerunner of the black literature represents the black community that has been subjected to diverse oppression: racism and gender discrimination being doubly sandwiched by the mainstream community and her own male community. Her autobiographical works aptly portray the pictures of both oppression and successfully evidences that the black women can fight out the aggressions against them. Maya looks positive towards in countering the oppressions laid by both the white and black communities. Her own life experiences are manifest enough to set the ideals for the society.

Key words: black literature, consciousness, marginalisation, women's persecution

Introduction: The subaltern and the black literature studies form their significance and recognition underlining their strong impact in the mainstream literature. In fact they ascertain to challenge the mainstream literature with their profundity, consciousness towards the society and its mouthpiece. Last few decades have evidenced upsurge in such writings that accept challenges and stand upright against the concurrent and imminent tides paved in their ways. Autobiography as genre

continues to contribute heavily in this regard and heralding to stand high in their endeavor to accept, struggle, encounter, fight out and to reestablish as the most read and significant writings in the world. Furthermore female writers have contributed equally and significantly vis-à-vis their male counterparts. The African Maya Angelou is an iconic in representing the black consciousness, seclusion and gender discrimination by her own men too as in the subaltern literature. Her autobiographical pieces are paramount works in that regard.

'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' (1970) is a new kind of memoir in which an Afro-American woman discusses her personnel life in a confessional way. The book was great critical and commercial success for Angelou which provided a child's perspective on retrieved and complicated world of adults. Her childhood was revived in the South America with her brother at her grandmother in Arkansas. This volume contains the terrible account of how Angelou, at the age of eight, was raped by her mother's lover and later murdered. It was Arkansas where she learnt the power of the white folks on the other hand in the town.

'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' set in motion when the three year old Angelou

and her four year old brother Bailey are turned over care of their paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas and it ends with the birth of her son when she is seventeen years old. Critical exploitation focuses on the correlation between language, speech and identity evidences by Angelou's suppression and eventually recovery from her own voice. The quality of the volume shapes the extraordinary autobiography with the personnel touch of realism and fine lyrical imagery. Sandra Neale rightly observes:

With the wide public and critical reception of '*I Know Why Caged Bird Sings*' in the early seventies, Angelou bridge the gap between life and art, a step that is essential if Black women are to be deservedly credited with the mammoth and creative feat of non-effacing survival. Critics could not dismiss her work so much 'folksy' propaganda because her narrative was held together by controlled techniques of artistic fiction as well as by a historic sociological study of Black feminine images seldom if ever viewed in American literature. (Neale 2-3)

Sandra Neale suggests that '*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*' bridges the gap between life and art; she also warns critics that they must not neglect this work by stamping it 'folksy'. This volume is composed from the day to day experiences of Afro-American woman and depicts the struggle for survival. Hence it seems real and unpretentious.

Angelou's second work '*Gather Together in My Name*' (1974) focuses on Maya and

her Brother Bailey's move away from their grandmother's house. This transformation takes place when she leaves her grandfather and has to earn money to feed the child. In this need she becomes a Creole cook, a madam, a tap dancer, even prostitute. She conclude the book with apology for her wreathed past.

'Neither politically nor linguistically innocent '*Gather Together in My Name*' reflects the imposition of values of a later period in the author's life. Undoubtedly, in organizing the incidents of text in a coherent manner (ie having recourse to memorization, selection of incidents etc), the fictive principle of which we spoke in our introduction, comes fully into play. The fact is that with time the perception of the subject changes, which demonstrates that the autobiographical statement indicates one's attitude towards the fact, rather than the presentation of the facts (ie the incidents) as given and unalterable. It is that attitude toward the facts to which critics should respond. (Cudjoe 29-30)

Selwin R. Codje comments on the issues of '*Gather Together in My Name*' and suggests that any autobiographer while arranging incident in coherent manner puts it according to his or her attitude. May be at that particular time author was not that much aware of the fact but while arranging the same fact in his writing his attitude plays an important role. So critics while discussing incidents must be conscious about author's attitude and respond in such way. Thus '*Gather Together in My Name*' is a notable work.

'*Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry Like Christmas*' (1976) reveals five years of

her life from twenty two to twenty seven. She was married to Tosh Angelou a Greek whom she divorced after five years. The volume opens with a sense of displacement in family bonds of her youth which is torn apart by the impact of urban life in California. Under these new circumstances the author examines her feelings and her relationship with the larger white society as she encounters white people on an intimate personnel level for the first time. Before Angelou can enter any relationship though she must dispense with all the stereotypical notions she has about white people.

With the end of her marriage the tears come and the fright that she would be cast into a feeling of rootlessness embroidered in her mind and soon gives way to the knowledge that she would be ridiculed by her people as in their belief she is another victim of 'a white man' who had taken a Black woman's body and leaves her helpless and alone.

In the story she encounters the white world in a much fuller and more sensuous manner, seeking answer to what it means to be a Black woman in America. The volume is divided into two parts in part one the writer works on her relationship with the white American world and part two is about her own development through her participation in the opera Porgy and Bess and her confrontation with Europe and Africa. In this regard again Cudjoe points out:

"In 1970, Maya Angelou produced her first work a volume concerned with what it meant to be Black and female in America. By 1976 she had enlarged her concern to address what it meant to be Black and person in America given the social, political

and economic constraints which militate against any achievement in contemporary

America". (Cudjoe 31)

In this volume, Angelo's view gets broadened than the earlier work, in this leaving the identity of a woman she thinks as a person. As an individual she has to face much constraint in her achievement.

In '*Heart of a Woman*' (1981) Maya reveals her quest for identity and place in androcentric society. It covers Angelou's life from 1957 to 1962. She depicts a story within a racial framework with particularly referring to the military protection of little Rock school children to the blocking of the civil rights bill by South Carolina senator. The story unfolds with Maya and Guy move from the security of Vivian Baxter's house to a houseboat near San Francisco which she shares with four whites. Angelou bypasses the year on the houseboat leaving the impression that it is unpleasant, embarrassing and too trivial to be remembered. She feels pain and joy as in her son growing up to find his own identity. In this book she mingles fiction and fantasy with more standard biographical and historical segments which makes to capture the subtleties of her relationship with her son and to emphasize the apparent similarities between their lives. In this consideration Carole E. Neubauer rightly observes:

'*In Heart of a woman*', Angelou deliberately strives to capture the individual conversational styles of her relatives and friends. In a sense, her friends and acquaintances become "characters" in the story of her life and like any good writer of fiction, she attempts to make their

conversations realistic and convincing with some of the people who figure in her autobiography there is no objective measure for credibility other than the readers critical

appreciations for life itself. (Neubauer25)

Angelou attempts to set a conversational style in such a way that readers feel them as real and convincing so as her friend and acquaintance become 'characters'.

The fifth volume '*All Gods Children and Travelling Shoes* (1986) presents her more developed in sense of connection with her African past. It attempts to ask how one writer can sketch a life through so many works and the easy answer can be that she can do so because her life has been more exciting, more adventurous, with challenges. In this volume she searches for her home and its contents on Angelou's realization that her son Guy has been a kind of personnel home for her and she has been his home. She realizes it after Guy suffers in an accident when she stands by his hospital bed while he lies motionless in a body cast with one arm and one leg fractured and his neck broken. To live near Guy in hospital; Angelou joins the group of Black American immigrants with ease sharing with each member the need to find a 'home' where they are neither hated nor abused because of their colour. Patrice Gaines Carter observes: "In all of its manifestations Angelou's search for 'home' a place a state of belonging - should be a universal journey understood by most readers. Although her story is one of an actual journey to another continent, it is also the story of a spiritual search that takes place inside every person who quest after self-knowledge." (Patrice-36)

Patrice Gaines Carter calls this journey from continent to continent as spiritual journey of Angelou's introspection as she painfully realized that Africa was not her dreamland due to her African life as Black solidarity with distrust of Black Americans.

'*A Song Flung up to Heaven*' (2002) begins as Angelou's return from Africa to the United States to work with Malcolm X. She got depressed by the assassination of Malcolm X followed by Martin Luther King Jr. which resulted in her complete withdrawal from the world. This volume took longer to publish depict her activities during 1960. She marked the racial crisis that America faced that time and her writing unmasked the brutal reality of racial conflict which took two eminent lives related to the Black race creating deep impact on her. In such circumstances James Baldwin invited her for dinner at the home of the cartoonist Jules Feiffer. The dinner somehow motivated Angelou to start writing about her and she moved to Stockton, California, in a quiet moment. Angelou began to write her first book '*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*'.

Angelou through her series of autobiographies portrays her success and failure. She could face successfully whatever challenges life threw in her path. Her contribution in the autobiographical form in America is undoubtedly remarkable in which she has minutely observes the changes occurring in American society. With her writing she tries to bring people and tradition together. As a humanist and versatile personality she makes her own life into great American success story. Her work seems to resemble to the eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narratives. Being a granddaughter of slave, born as an Arkansas

woman she has a rich and varied life which skillfully intervenes in her writing that creates collective social history of the Afro-Americans.

Angelou creates a female cultural identity and a positive black woman's image by her writing and describes herself as the protagonist succeeding gradually from helpless victim. Her work can be recognized as a cultural autobiography because the story of a black woman's selfhood is inseparable from her sense of community.

The sharp voice of Angelou is audible enough to encourage the upcoming black writers while her work denotes the domination of androcentric world which suppressed her to be mute. Her writing predicts the need for black women to emerge and show the white world that voice of black women can no longer be remain mute.

Bama and Angelou both the writers belong to the marginalized sections of society dismantled in the caste; race and gender, affected and they institutionalize literary and linguistic power as a mode of representation of humans in literature particularly women. Their narratives that carefully interview personnel and social life becomes 'voice' and 'make heard' what the white upper caste narratives are unable to interpret.

Conclusion

Maya Angelo's works outline the socio-political, cultural and religious milieu of her country, exploitation, oppression, gender discrimination and racial conflicts along with the strategies used to fight, to struggle, to resist and revive as innate spirited being rather than submissive. The Afro- American struggle to survive and becomes a challenge to live in the racist and androcentric world.

In such sexual and power politics ruled by the androcentric world sizable group of woman writers in the black literary realm constantly redefine their identity, position and practice struggling to end the race superiority and ensure social and gender equality.

On one hand the world celebrates the International Women's Day appreciates and honour women to have created their space in this androcentric society and on the other crimes and subjugation against women are raising day by day. In such circumstances if one wants to create awareness of equality between woman-man relationships it is necessary to view the victimization of woman in the expressed class awareness about such victimization and to endeavor for their liberation. Angelou disrupts the literary traditions through her life experiences, memories and virtues to which past are connected to the present. Through these remembrances, Maya challenges the world with her aggression, bravery, combativeness and stakes her admirable position in the literary and human world.

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