

Quest for Identity-A Thematic Study on Select Novels of Maya Angelou

K.Sasidher

Asst. Professor of English

Viswanadha Institute of Technology and Management

Visakhapatnam-530017

Andhra Pradesh

India

Email- sasidhar22@yahoo.com

Through the device of writing autobiography, Maya Angelou shared her quest for human individuality, identifying her personal struggle with the general conditions of the Black Americans, which take up role not only in relation to the Black Americans, but also in relation to the very idea of America. Her autobiographies celebrate the richness and vitality of Southern Black life that persist in the face of poverty and racial prejudice. Initially, her celebration of the Southern Black life is revealed through the portrait of the author's life as a black child in Arkansas of the 1930s in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The second delineated a young woman struggling to create an existence striving to achieve a promising life and love in America during post-World War II in *Gather Together in My Name*.

The major sources of the themes in her poetry, plays, and screen plays were her autobiographical novels. Her chief mission was to evoke critical self-reflection. She was aware that her bitter and vexed past led her to taste the sugar of her present triumphant position as the renowned Renaissance woman called Maya Angelou. In fact, her artistry made her enjoy the heights of her life and success acted as a driving force to the readers to comprehend themselves better.

Maya Angelou is one of the most respected African American women who has made her niche in the hearts of the people as an autobiographer, poet, dancer, film producer, television producer, playwright, actress, civil rights activist and film director par excellence.

The writings of Maya Angelou (Marguerite Annie Johnson) a black woman autobiographer, depict her anguish as a poor southern black girl devoid of love and opportunities in the so called prosperous, promising land. Her quest for identity, gradual realization and recognition of black beauty and self-acceptance of black womanhood as well as motherhood are also significantly portrayed in her writings. In fact, she is one of the first African American women who publicly discusses her private life. The above mentioned traits inspired me to study her first two classic autobiographies.

The present paper is a thematic study of the Maya Angelou's first two autographical novels, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name*.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the first of five volumes of Maya Angelou's autobiography, which cover the years from the early 1930's, up until about 1970. This volume begins with Maya's childhood and ends with her giving birth to a baby boy. The prologue and early chapters are largely introductory, giving the setting of the black culture, developing the main characters, and introducing the themes. The heart of the book speaks of how different incidents in Angelou's life affected her and her struggles towards self-understanding and independence. Maya's rape, subsequent muteness, her interaction with Mrs. Flowers, mocking pro-white trash girls, her visit to the dentist, Maya's month living in a Junkyard, her struggle to become a San Francisco street-car conductor, doubt about her sex, her graduation, and accepting motherhood were the important events as they shaped her personality and cast her to the light of understanding about life.

Throughout her book, she admitted her true self. This sort of narration in black women writing was unprecedented.

Women writers did not dare talk about their marginalized lives and conditions through central characters until the mid-twentieth century, but Maya Angelou took those stories to public notice.

This strong voice was the ultimate product of Maya's personality. Maya was no longer ashamed of her race or sex, instead she was proud and gained confidence as a "Negro female". Her struggle and triumph over prejudices, and barriers like racism, sexism, personal desolation, loneliness, and low self-image of herself illuminated her strength and beauty. She proved that a strong determined soul can overcome any kind of situation in the world.

Hence, Maya Angelou's thought-provoking memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* opened the doors to the readers to enter into her private world and gave them an insight into the failures and triumphs of her life. In her novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, writer Maya Angelou lined up the images of despair, pain, loneliness and the perpetual sufferings of her life in particular and her race in general as the members of the black community. In this book she vividly narrates her experiences in various situations and a wide variety of people. She used the name of her book in a symbolic manner to make her identified as a bird in the cage singing in joy irrespective of the her caged status. In other words, she wanted to make it a point that in the final analysis she came to terms with life and learnt to take things as they were. In the latter part of the book, it was understood that even though she was restricted by circumstances as a bird is in the cage, she took things for granted and found joy in her setting or situations by changing her perception and attitude towards various situations. In her narration it was clear that she was victimized by one and all because of her unprivileged birth and upbringing as a black woman. She learnt to forgive her exploiters and tried to live a normal life. Her story spoke volumes about her unflinching faith in her identity and beauty of her race taking pride in being a coloured woman.

Gather Together in My Name is the successive novel of Maya Angelou's first novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In *Gather Together in My Name*, Maya Angelou records her odyssey with her newly born baby, who came out of an impulsive testing of her sexual

identity. She chronicles the struggles to reach a promising life and carry both the beauty and the burden of motherhood and womanhood. In this journey she went into unsuccessful relationships and came out dissatisfied. The men with whom she developed relationships barring her brother, Bailey and her neighborhood, L. C. Smith and Troubadour Martin whom she saw at her boss's restaurant in Oakland, exploited her physically, financially and psychologically. In this volume Maya worked as a dancer, a cook, a Madam, a waitress, and briefly as a prostitute. Though she was iron-willed and sharp minded, she was unable to keep her life away from her vulnerabilities. Readers sense a tragic decline in her vital strength now and then. The novel depicts how most of the African American women in the urban backdrop were trapped into the world of drugs and prostitution.

Throughout her two years life's journey, she encountered many hurdles and failures. She deeply longed for a secure life, but the dream never came true. Her persistence, confidence and human concerns created hope to expand her vision for life. Though she was cheated by Curly, R. L. Poole and L.D. Tolbrook, she never blamed them; instead she tried to discover her own flaws and comprehend the situation better. She never drifted away from her world of fantasy as winning an ideal man's hand that must yield deep quench for both physical and spiritual love, and accomplishing a secured life. At one stage, she learnt that money alone could not bring happiness, but it could create threat and chaos to life. Many times her tenderness, sensuality and innocence led her to the questionable arena regarding failures in her life. Every time, she dreamt of living she and her man together: first with Curly, next with R. L. Poole and then with L.D. Tolbrook and Troubadour Martin respectively. Gathering all these events together were her life's unforgotten experiences. Her multiple vocations mirrored the pathetic situations and constrained life styles of African American women in the so called promised land, United States of America. Her story represented the tragic lives of young black girls.

At the end of the story, though she found no mission or destination for her life, she realized her innocence and swore not to give up her struggle. As a result she could come out from the crisis of identity.

Maya Angelou's first two autobiographical works, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name* created a unique place in black autobiographical tradition, by their ability through circumspectly fashioned form to measure both the vulnerabilities and the intrinsic grandeur of black folk and cultural traditions. They went into the peculiar mission of the creative and contradictory self. The autobiographies reveal the author's strong appetite for the ultimate existence, and accepting the bitter realities in life with lion-heartedness. The psychological phenomenon of Maya Angelou made her a distinguished personality in the course of her divergent experiences. She blamed neither the society nor the family institution for her suffering and critical situations, whereas many great black authors neglected this aspect and projected it negatively.

Through the device of writing autobiography, Maya Angelou shared her quest for human individuality, identifying her personal struggle with the general conditions of the

Black Americans, which made her play a representative role not only in relation to Black Americans, but also in relation to the very idea of America. Her autobiographies celebrate the richness and vitality of Southern Black life and the sense of community that persists in the face of poverty and racial prejudice. Initially, her celebration of Southern Black life is revealed through the portrait of the author's life as a black child in Arkansas of the 1930s in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The second delineated a young woman struggle to create an existence striving to achieve a promising life and love in America during post-World War II in *Gather Together in My Name*.

Maya Angelou's serial autobiography recaptured her own subjective experiences. Throughout her work, she described the personal, social, cultural, and historical influences which shaped her life and personality. She explored herself and individual identity and her relationship with the family, the community and the world.

Of course, the divergent experiences which she confronted in her life represented the stages of her spiritual growth and awareness. Her study of autobiography was significant as it offered her deep insights into personal and group experience in America. Her work echoed her conception of herself as a human being and the survival strategies available to a black woman in America.

The major sources of the themes in her poetry, plays, and screen plays were her autobiographical novels. Her chief mission was to evoke critical self-reflection. She was aware that her bitter and vexed past led her to taste the sugar of her present triumphant position as the renowned Renaissance woman called Maya Angelou. In fact, her artistry made her enjoy the heights of her life and success acted as a driving force to the readers to comprehend themselves better.

Angelou perceived her work as an opportunity for her readers to peer into her world and reflected on their own worlds, a point of self-reflection that would engage one to observe oneself and concurrently to observe humanity. She waged her own revolution and became a paradigm to her readers to survive and transcend a socially constructed ideology designed to control self-understanding and socio-economic mobility.

It is no doubt that because of Angelou's efforts, the African American woman has gained wider respectability and greater reception. Her vividness and veracity have moved the impetus to the blacks to struggle for equality. She has richly recorded the African American feminine experience from the early days of the Civil Rights Movement to the present day. In her lectures, Angelou brought to public attention the countless and important contributions that African Americans have made to American culture and literature.

According to Angelou, the African American Woman epitomizes the strong-will to survive without losing empathy and compassion. She herself, promoted the archetypal black female representative for black female inclusiveness.

Her greatest legacy lies in her ability to infuse universality into her experience through her literary works, especially her elevation of racial and gender concerns. Her books continue to be studied in American Studies and Women's Studies classes.

A study of Maya Angelou's autobiographical works reveals that Maya Angelou's main objective is not only to narrate her story of triumph at the personal level but also to voice the trail and tribulations of African American women in the backdrop of racial and gender discrimination even in the advanced west. In her endeavour, she succeeded to document the social history of her fellow women and social economic conditions of the west.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1969.

Angelou, Maya. *Gather Together in My Name*. New York: Random House, 1974.

Secondary Sources

Baisnée, Valérie. *Gendered Resistance: The Autobiographies of Simone de Beauvoir, Maya Angelou, Jenet Frame and Marguerite Duras*. Amsterdam-Atlanta GA, 1997.

Braxton, Joanne M. ed. *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Chapman, Abraham. ed. *Black Voices: An Anthology of African American Literature*. US: Signet Classic, 2001.

Elliot, Jeffrey M. ed. *Conversations with Maya Angelou*. US: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

Franklin, Hope J. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. 3rd ed., rev. New Delhi: Amerind, 1967.

Hoffman, Daniel. ed. *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*. Delhi: Oxford, 1981.

Lupton, Mary Jane. *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*. US: Greenwood Publishers, 1998.

McPherson, Dolly A. *Order Out of Chaos*. New York: Peter Lang, 1990.

Nelson, Emmanuel S. Ed. *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook*. US: Greenwood Press, 2002

Rampersad, Arnold. Introduction. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Poems, 1921-1940*. vol. 1. US: University of Missouri Press, 2001.

Shuman, R. Baird, *Lyrical Language in Maya Angelou's Autobiographies*. New York: Cavendish, 2002.

Stevenson, Robert Louis ed., *Memories and Portraits-Memoirs of Himself-Selection from His Notebook*. US: Read Books, 2006.

Washington, Mary Helen. *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960*. New York: Anchor Press, 1987.

Washington, Robert E. *The ideologies of African American literature: from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Nationalist revolt: A Sociology of Literature Perspective*. Ed: illustrated. Chicago: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

Williams, Yolanda. ed. *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers*. vol. 2. US: Greenwood Press, 2007.

Articles:

Braxton, Joanne M., Wilma King. "Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition" *The Journal of Southern History* 57.3 (Aug., 1991): 523-524.

Brush, Paula S. "The Influence of Social Movements on Articulation of Race and Gender in Black Women's Autobiographies" *Gender and Society* 13.1 part2 (Feb.' 1999): 120-137.

Bryfonski, Derida, ed. "Maya Angelou (1928)" *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 12 (1980): 9-14.

Draper, James P., ed. "Maya Angelou (1928)" *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 77 (1993): 1-38.

Gross, Robert A. "Growing Up Black" *Newsweek* 75 (March 1, 1970): 88-93.

Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, Maria K. Mootry Ikerionwu "Black Women and Feminism: Two Reviews" *Phylon* (1960-) 44.1(1st Qtr., 1983) 84-86.

Ikerionwu, Maria K. Mootry. "The Heart of a Woman by Maya Angelou" *Phylon* (1960-) 44.1 (1st Qtr., 1983) 86-87.

Kent, George E. "Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and black autobiographical Tradition." *Kansas Quarterly* 7 (1975) 75.

Lupton, Mary Jane. "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity" *Black American Literature Forum* 24.2 (Summer 1990) 257-276.

Marowski, Daniel G, ed. "Maya Angelou (1928)" *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 35 (1985): 29-33.

McPherson, Dolly A, Mary Jane Lupton "Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou" *Black American Literature Forum* 24.4 (Winter 1990) 809-814.

Russell, Sandi, "Maya Angelou" *Women's Review* (December 1985): 8-9.

Spacks, Patricia M, "Stages of Self: Notes on Autobiography and the Life Cycle". *Boston University Journal*, 25.2 (1977): 7-17.

Walker, Pierre. "Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" *College Literature* 22.3 (October 1995): 91-108
