

International Journal of Scientific Research and Reviews

Quest for Self-Identity: A Study of Maya Angelou's Autobiographies

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ABSTRACT

The writings of Maya Angelou a black woman autobiographer, depict her anguish as a poor southern black girl devoid of love and opportunities in the so called prosperous and promising land. 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 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. 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*. Maya Angelou is one of the most respected and finest 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. Her chief mission was to evoke critical self-reflection. The present paper is an honest attempt to attract the attention of the readers and researchers towards the struggles of Maya Angelou whose pains and agonies are undescribed in words. The heart of the paper speaks of how different incidents in Angelou's life affected her and her struggles towards self-understanding and independence. Throughout her books, she admitted her true self.

Key-words: Autobiographer, Anguish, Poor, Black Girl, Devoid, Quest For Identity, Recognition, Womanhood, Motherhood, Richness, Vitality, Striving.

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INTRODUCTION:

Marguerite Annie Johnson Maya Angelou (Marguerite Annie Johnson) wrote ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ in 1969 as an autobiography about her struggles growing up as an African American woman. Angelou born on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri but spent most of her early childhood in Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou’s life has been a mean of inspiration to boys and girls all over the world. Her life, full of ups and downs made her the strong independent woman which everyone today aspires to be. Angelou wrote her book in such a beautiful way that it had the innocence of a child while still maintaining a sense of maturity. Her description of the situation according to her age is mesmerizing. A person just feels that a kid is narrating the story when she is talking about her childhood. Marguerite and her younger brother Bailey moved to Stamps, Arkansas with their grandmother and their father’s brother, Willie. Marguerite’s father’s mother whom she called Momma was an old typical Southern woman whereas her uncle was handicapped and they both ran a store called the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store but being the only general store in the town it was simply referred to as the Store. Momma ran the Store and took care of the kids and Uncle Willie. Marguerite was really close to her brother Bailey, Jr. who gave her the nickname ‘Maya’. He used to call her ‘My Sister’ but it changed to ‘My Sister’ then ‘Mya’ and later ‘Maya’ because of lack of time in everyday conversation and brevity. Maya and her brother spent their early childhood in Stamps. They used to spend their days going to school, doing the household chores and helping around the Store. Their Momma was a religious woman and wanted her grandkids to be good Christians and loyal citizens of their country. She was a self-made independent woman who raised her kids and their kids all by herself and wanted them to be self-reliant and independent as well. Maya’s father came unannounced one day in Stamps and told her and her brother that he would be taking her and Bailey to their mother in St. Louis. The kids had never spent much time with their parents and despite the blood relation they were a bit wary of them in the beginning. The closest thing Maya had to a parent was Momma whom she loved and cared for. Moving to a place like St. Louis after living in Stamps was a huge change in the lifestyle.¹ In Stamps everything was self-made and produced but in the big city you just bought things and then you threw them away. The city schools were not as focused on education either, and the kids found themselves to be smarter than almost every other kid in the class. The big city and the big family was a little too overwhelming for seven and eight year olds. And that’s when it happened when everything was finally looking to be getting back on track. Maya, Bailey and their mother Vivian lived with Vivian’s boyfriend Mr. Freeman. Maya didn’t think much of Freeman before the incident but what he did scarred her for life and the things he did haunted her for a very long time. One unfortunate day when no one was at

home except Maya and Freeman he raped her and then threatened her not to tell anyone or he would kill her brother. The scared little eight year old girl who knew that this monster meant what he said and so did nothing and told no one. Ultimately her mother found out and reported the incident to the police and Freeman ended up getting arrested and put on trial but later got released but finally met his end when he was found dead a few days later.

OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this present paper is to attract the attention of the readers and researchers towards the struggles of Maya Angelou whose pains and agonies are undescribed in words. In spite of her very hard life, she makes her own self-identity and proves herself as one of the most powerful women of the world.

Sex – People need to understand that all of us are created by that almighty. We as an individual are no one to decide the fate of other individual. Difference in respect based on sex of person is not acceptable. In some parts of the world, males feel that they are superior to the female and thus are ignorant towards girl child and vice – versa can be seen in some other countries. There have been cases of female foeticide throughout the world. This has already disturbed the harmony in the society. Both male and female should be given equal respect. They are the two dimensions of the society and in absence of any one of the dimension the society cannot sustain for a longer period of time.²

Race: This again has become a major factor of differentiation in the modern worlds. It has been spreading like a contagious disease from one person to another. An individual treats another individual differently if he belongs to a different race. The lack of attachment between people can be clearly seen. On the other hand, if two people belonging to some race come in contact with each other, the difference in their behaviour and emotional attachment between them can be clearly observed. We should always remember that before belonging to any race we belong to mankind and should not discriminate anyone on the basis of their colour, language or origin.³

Age: As the human, we have this preconceived notion in our mind since childhood that we should respect our elders. This is another factor where unknowingly we discriminate one person from the other. Age is only related to the body, and we need to respect 'I' not body. Each and every individual should be respected. Being young does not mean one should not be respected.

Physical strength: This is also a state of body. Physical strength should not be the parameters to differentiate people. If we give respect to someone who is physically stronger than us then probably it is not respect, it is fear. The fear of being harmed from the other who is physically stronger than us.⁴

Atrocities and Pain: The atrocities and pain she endured scared and scarred her to the point that she couldn't speak to anyone. She spent some days in hospital but her mental health was still in tatters. And so after about a year in St. Louis, Maya and her brother moved back to Stamps, Arkansas. In Stamps, she found the support and familiarity she needed to put the ill-fated incident behind her and start leading a normal life as a child. She started going to school with enthusiasm again and started making friends. Her friend Louise was quite close to her and helped her get back on her feet. But being black and a girl in the Southern part of the States was not an easy task. It was a scary thing to walk alone through the middle of the white part of the town. The KKK were at the peak of their position and racial violence erupted every now and then, resulting usually in the favor of the whites. Black girls and women were abducted and raped, kids killed and men were slaughtered apparently for no reason but race. These things are not easy for a kid to comprehend. The kid starts to think, "Did I do something wrong?" Not being able to understand why they are hated by almost every fair complexioned person without having ever met them before. What could they have possibly done which could have resulted in such a hatred? The author implies that even the caged bird may have never experienced freedom; deep down the bird still knows that it is made to be free. The caged bird is "fearful" because it is "unknown", it still sings "a fearful trill" because it still longed for freedom. The author reveals that her cry for freedom is "heard on the distant hill". This is represented as author's cry for freedom in the form of equality. She felt that her voice is heard but as noise.⁵

The last line states "for the caged bird sings for the freedom". The caged bird may not have yet experienced freedom but it still sings of it because it knows that it is created for freedom. The author feels that black Americans wrote and sang and danced and cried for freedom they deserve but they were treated as distant voice. Yet this would not stop them from crying for equality and freedom which they deserved. They would not take rest until they were given their rights as human beings to enjoy the freedom they were created to enjoy.⁶

Quest for self-Identity: Years and years of oppression and struggle had turned the taste sour in the mouths of both the parties. White and black struggled maintaining peace with each other. Race was complemented with wealth which lead to further division and distant between the two groups.

Whites were mostly rich while blacks struggled to put two square meals on the table. Whites lived in well maintained urban areas and cities while blacks had to make do with rural country areas without basic amenities. All these things were not easily understood by a child. Maya and her brother both struggled with the truth in the society. Why was it like this? Why are we discriminated against? Questions like this and an incident with Bailey and a dead black man who was fished out of the local pond lead to Momma deciding that it was time for the kids to live with their parents and move into the city. Vivian Baxter had moved to San Francisco, California and so the kids went to live with her in the big city. They were well taken care of by their mother and adjusted fairly well in the environment.⁷ Life changed quite drastically after moving to San Francisco. Maya felt alone as Bailey started growing distant to her and she didn't feel quite close to her mother then. She felt alone and lost. And that's when she started reading more and more and discovered herself once again. This was a vital moment in Angelou's life as it helped shape her personality and character. A lot of strong independent women influenced Angelou in her life, each quite different to other and yet all had contributed significantly in shaping her life in a way she could not imagine. The first was her own grandmother, her Momma. Living with Momma in her early childhood, Maya grew accustomed to doing whatever was told to her. However, Maya later realized that whatever Momma did, it was all for her sake and benefit. Momma was a pious woman who attended church every Sunday. She taught Maya about right and wrong, about being merciful and just. She taught her that no matter how hard it gets, you have to march on and go forward for the Lord will take care of the rest. Momma could not read or write but she still commanded respect from far more learned men and women because of who she was, what she had endured and what she was capable of doing. The honesty and holiness inside her was unquestionable and she laid a strong foundation of conscience in Maya's personality and thinking. Maya later realized that no matter how hard the situations got, Momma never let go of her cool. She would get angry and scold but never lose control of what she was doing. She was as balanced a person could get and most of that revolved around being religious.⁸

Another person who shaped Maya's life was her own mother. She was exceptionally beautiful and elegant and charming. One couldn't not like her. She was quick to laugh and smile, she was warm and affectionate and understanding. She used to say simple things which had deep meanings. She was also an independent and self-reliant woman. She tended to her children's needs and provided them with the best of stuff. She was caring and open minded. She taught Maya that, "One has to hope for the best and prepare for the worst and so no situation can surprise you." She was not the most religious of women but that didn't make her any less respected or loved. She knew who she was and that was her strength. She was so balanced mentally and emotionally that even when her son

left home after fighting with her, she called him, met him the next day and bid him good luck for the future. She was the strongest and most reliable person in Maya's life.⁹

Mrs. Flowers was another person who shaped Maya's life quite significantly. Maya met her when she was in Stamps, Arkansas. Once Mrs. Flowers was buying some items from Momma's store and Maya felt embarrassed about the way Momma was talking to Mrs. Flowers. Momma was respectable and gentle but kept saying the wrong words and messing up the grammar rules. Maya didn't want Mrs. Flowers to think less of her grandmother. Mrs. Flowers realized this and asked Momma to send Maya with her items to her house. Mrs. Flowers was a learned woman who understood what was going on Maya's mind and told her that education was important in life to move forward but, "One must be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy." She also gave her books to read and poems to recite to help her learn and go further in life. She taught her the importance of education and how to be understanding and sympathetic.¹⁰

Bailey was a person whom Maya trusted with her life. She was her constant companion and friend. She told him everything and he almost always knew what she was going to say. He made her happy. She was also protective of him which created a little distant between the two for a while. Bailey, Jr. was a troubled teen trying to find his own identity and love and quite lost in both. She loved him and felt empathy for him. He was her constant source of support and strength and it was almost impossible for her to recover from the unfortunate incident with Freeman without Bailey. He taught her a great many things about life and people. He helped her understand why people did particular things and the motives behind it. He also taught her never to back down and stop questioning things but the thing which Maya most remembers that her brother said to her is, "All knowledge is spendable currency, depending on the market."¹¹

Summing up:

To conclude; we come to the point that the life of Maya Angelou is full of ups and downs but she is never disappointed by her failures and at last; she proves herself as one of the most successful women in the world. Maya Angelou led a life so intriguing and intense that it feels almost untrue. But on counter thought her life is just a window in the life of millions of African American people living the life of oppression and struggle. Her life told the people of the world what's wrong with the world and questioned whether people should be called 'people'?

It's a life without wealth, a life without short-cuts, a life without mercy, it's a life where people end up questioning the existence of God and the existence of humanity all the while providing others the

courage to stand up to their demons and fight because no one's going to come to save them except themselves. No man or god is coming, you have to be the change you want to see in the world.

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