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Maya Angelou's Life and Works as an Inspirational Sources to the Women

Kotteeswari. R

M.Phil. Scholar

Department Of English

Vels University, Chennai 600117

kottee.lit@gmail.com

Anbarasi. U

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Vels University, Chennai600117

anbusankar25@gmail.com

Abstract: *Maya Angelou's life experiences is not just a history to be written but it is the sources of positivity and a portrayal of life from lifeless which conveys valuable meaning to the women all over the world and of any generation, especially to the black women. Maya Angelou's autobiographical fiction and poems has deep rooted positive aspects shows a life of a women from how a young black girl dwelt in an dominant American society, her struggles of revelation on self to the nation have attained such an identity first as a black woman, then as an artist and as a writer. Her writings are not merely a piece of literary work to the literature of American Nation but it is a guideline of life that inspires, motivates, instructs and regulates every woman on how to look at life in an optimistic way along with the torments they endured. Despite her works, it is Angelou's life story that emphasizes and teaches the value of patience, hope, perseverance, and the power of positive attitude against the pain through the name of Maya Angelou's autobiographies.*

Keywords: *African- American, Racism, Positivity, Phenomenal, Identity, Self.*

INTRODUCTION

Marguerite Ann Johnson (1928-2014) popularly known as Maya Angelou, a prolific writer in African American Literary history, memoirist, famous poetess, etc. best known for her autobiographies especially the first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which brought her a universal admiration as a writer and recognition to the African American life and culture. She was a remarkable poet wrote several books of poetry and three books of essays. She helped creating a positive change to the people by giving a mainstream voice to women of colour and the black experience in the United States during a tumultuous period of social change. She was also a phenomenal poetess, have written a critically acclaimed poem which was motivational and inspiring. She also had different occupational faces at an early age like sex worker, a night club dancer and performer, cast member of the opera *Porgy Bess*, coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, worked as a journalist in Egypt and Ghana, etc. She was also an actor, director, produced plays, movies and television programs. She was an active Civil Rights Movement, worked with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. She received over 50 Honorary Doctorate Degrees. Maya Angelou was a great inspiration and a celebrated literary personality even today.

The contribution of Maya Angelou's writings to African American Literature is not merely of literary works but also has deep inspirational and motivational aspects to the women of any region and country all over the world then and now. The writings of Maya Angelou, especially her autobiographies record the birth, her childhood and her adult experiences and struggles among the American society as a black woman. Meanwhile it also represents the life and struggles of every black woman in the American patriarchal society. Her verbal skill has created identity and respect not just to her work and to the nation she dwelled, but has also credited self-identity to every women's heart.

Maya Angelou used the unique style of narrative form known as “Autobiographical Fiction” in which it is similar to the conventional form of autobiography but she made an attempt in expanding the form deliberately in order to particularize the personal experiences of her life from her perception on her personal life. Even though Angelou’s narrative style was criticized by many, she determined to continue with the same style thus shows her positivity and motivational aspects in her works. Her autobiographies has also considered unique for vary reasons. Her life has not penned down in one book but its written in series of seven autobiographies in which all these records the life and experiences of one individual, Maya Angelou. Although it is considered as autobiography, it has the shade of fictional contents like plot, characterization, dialogues, etc. given by her to the story of her life. For these purposes Maya Angelou’s writings were criticized as "to be representative rather than individual, authoritative rather than confessional" (Burr, 183).

Through her writings, Angelou publicly discussed her personal life in a particularized form i.e. she used the conventional chronological form of writing an autobiography but she specifically discussed on the events and the experiences she had in her childhood and adult life. Moreover, she interpreted her life experiences by Maya Angelou herself. She penned her life, not as an autobiographical writer but put an effort in viewing her life incidents from the black women’s perception. Each and every work of Maya Angelou explores the dark life of being an African-American woman in the United States and with a solution of how she overcame these obstacles she endured.

Like autobiographies, Maya Angelou’s poems were considered to be phenomenal and motivational. Her Poems such as *Still I Rise*, *I know Why the Caged Bird Sing*, etc. expressed her sense of motivation to attain freedom and also witnessed her feelings towards the dominant American society. *On the Pulse of Morning* (1993) considered special poem as it was recited at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton. Both her autobiographies and poems shared more or less same themes but her autobiographies gained greater importance than her poems. Angelou's lack of critical acclaim has been attributed to her popular success and to critics' preferences for poetry as a written form rather than a spoken, performed one.

Angelou uses laughter or ridicule instead of tears to cope with minor irritations, sadness, and great suffering. Many of her poems are about love, relationships, or overcoming hardships, as expressed in poems of hers. Angelou’s poems never focused on the pessimism but it expressed the pessimistic situation of the African American people’s life in an optimistic tone. I.e. Her poems continue the themes of mild protest and survival also found in her autobiographies, and inject hope through humour.

One of the critics of Maya Angelou, Lyman B. Hagen commented on her works or the portrayal of her life as “a journey of discovery and rebirth” (Hagen, 95). It is true to the fact that her life was not just a history to be written but it has the purpose to convey and to present the life of a black woman who have a positive vision on her struggles and the value of hope and strength of being a self. Her books "stretch over time and place" (Lupton, 1), from Arkansas to Africa and back to the U.S., and take place from the beginnings of World War II to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

In Maya Angelou’s first book of autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) narrates her life from her birth, her childhood with her grandmother Annie Henderson and her elder brother Bailey Johnson, her life in Arkansas and later with her mother Vivian. Her adolescent experiences goes on with the troubles and struggles she had and the book ends with rose of her confident and her state of being with her new born son; Whereas in her second book, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) focuses on her working experiences and the life of single mother. She tries to provide for her young son and find her place in the world. Both books dealt with her life story as a black girl who grew up with the same issues of discrimination, race and racism, domination and as a woman among the patriarchal white society.

In *Singin’ and Swinin’ and Getting’ Merry like Christmas* one of the most popular from Maya Angelou’s series of autobiography, call it as “a graphical portrait of the adult self in bloom” (McPherson, 80). This book is regarded as the first work of an African American woman who had expanded her life story into a third volume. Even though this volume shared the same themes as was in her previous work, it also dealt with the sentimental aspects of a woman as a mother who left her child for a while for the betterment of their life, for occupational purposes, and also records the exploration of self as a strong woman and a performer. It was the time when she turned herself from Marguerite Johnson to Maya Angelou for professional purpose. As scholar Dolly McPherson states, "When one encounters Maya Angelou in her story, one encounters the humour, the pain, the exuberance, the honesty, and the determination of a human being who has experienced life fully and retained her strong sense of self" (McPherson, 90).

Maya Angelou’s autobiography regarded as representative of the convention in African-American autobiography as a public gesture that spoke for an entire group of people, the third book particularly describes Maya Angelou’s life and not an attempt to represent the whole black women because it was the part of her life where she had the opportunity to explore where she destined to and what was her role in her life. Angelou realised her clear vision of life and she approached it with positivity despite her pain and struggles. Even the title has its significance but in an opposite dimension. The title *Singin’ and Swinin’ and Getting’ Merry Like Christmas* signifies the optimistic, merry life but this book focuses on one of the tough part of her Maya Angelou’s life.

Maya Angelou's portrayal of her life continues with the active performance as a mother of a teenage son, Guy; she become more active in political activities and participates in African-American and African protest rallies. As described in her fourth autobiography *The Heart of a Woman* focuses on the events of her life experiences between 1957 and 1962, where she involved in political activities and exposed to the new Harlem Writers Guild through her friend novelist John Killens. She meets other important African-American artists and writers, including James Baldwin, who would become her mentor. She becomes a published writer for the first time.

Hagen writes, "Faithful to the ongoing themes of survival, sense of self, and continuing education, *The Heart of a Woman* moves its central figure to a point of full personhood." (Hagen, 107). Maya Angelou in this part of autobiography she also discussed about her relationships and motherhood activities she made. She also added some emotional incidents like her son Guy's accident, her relationship with the freedom fighter Vusumki Make, Guy's approval of going to attend his college in the University of Ghana, etc. As a mother she had the sigh of relief as her son attains his independence and she could look forward to her own career and activities.

The Events between 1962 and 1965 was the period of Maya Angelou's "trying to get home" (Lupton, 138), where she developed her relationship with the people she met in Ghana. As Guy's automobile accident leads her to depression and unable to move out of Ghana, she found occupation at the University of Ghana and continued her stay with the people and she loves them. Not only that, as a matured mother to a grown son she eventually respects Guy's choices and consciously stops making her son the centre of her life.

Her expansion of political relationship for the African freedom in America goes on with supporting of Martin Luther King Jr. She and her friends commemorate his 1963 march on Washington by organizing a parallel demonstration in Ghana. Angelou, she once again met her political friend Malcolm X in Ghana and he encouraged her to come to America and support the movement and activism. She encouraged herself to return to America and continue her political activities as well as her contribution to literature. She left her son in Ghana for his earn his degree and the home-like Ghana.

In 1965, she returned to the United States in order to support the Civil Right Movement but two Calamitous events occurred were the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. These events have made drastic changes in both the political life of American society and in Maya Angelou's personal life. From 1965 to 1968, there was a great impact in the political life of Maya Angelou after these calamities. She isolates herself until invited to a dinner party also attended by her friend James Baldwin and cartoonist Jules Feiffer and his wife Judy. Judy Feiffer, inspired by her tales about Angelou's childhood, contacts editor Robert Loomis, who challenges Angelou to write her autobiography as literature. She accepts his challenge, and Angelou at the gateway of her literary career, writing the opening lines to her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

She began writing of her autobiographical series started from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) to *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002) and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013). By the time *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* was written in 2002, sixteen years after her previous autobiography, Angelou had experienced great fame and recognition as an author and poet. She had become recognized and highly respected as a spokesperson for Blacks and women.

Angelou's seventh and last autobiography *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013) entirely focuses on Maya Angelou's successful story, her relationship with her mother Vivian Baxter from the separation to the reunion with Baxter, Angelou's life as a black woman and how she grew as the voice of blacks and women, her path as a writer, as a mother, as an activist and the complete summarization of her previous works and experiences. The last autobiography serves as a biography within an autobiography where it chronicles both Angelou's life and her mother's. It is more of a reflection of Angelou's love to her mother rather than an motivational, though this book emphasize the importance of love and support to people stated in the prologue, "Love heals. Heals and liberates. I use the word "love", not meaning sentimentality, but a condition so strong that it may be that which holds the stars in their heavenly positions and that which causes the blood to flow orderly in our veins. This book has been written to examine some of the ways love heals and helps a person to climb impossible heights and rise from immeasurable depths". (*Mom & Me & Mom. prologue*)

Her perseverance towards overcoming the obstacles set forth an example to the people of all generations and the generations to come. Her tactical views on life helped her to reach such a great heights after all the suffer she experienced. Maya Angelou's goal is not just ended up with attain freedom from the dominant world and become writer but she spread equality to all kind of people irrespective of their colour and gender.

Angelou was the one who recognized and expressed that she as a child of God and it was her duty to recognize that everyone else in the world was also a child of God. Angelou, from her experiments on life she realised the universal fact that it is not fair to blame others for what she endured but to accept it in positive manner that teaches a lesson of life.

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