

**Peripheral Invisibility to Central Vision: Maya Angelou's Life Writings**

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**Abstract**

*Post colonial women's writing generally discusses the social, cultural and political issues which marginalise women based on andro-eurocentric paradigms. The bold and assertive articulations of the marginalised women writers enable them to create a different discursive space. The black women struggled for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously. Their commitment to the struggles is profoundly rooted in their lived experiences and hence the aggressiveness is sharp and lasting. The description of black women was so prejudiced and so they have decided to write an autobiography for themselves which gave them a self-determined identity. Angelou's emphasis on Black social conditions, Black struggle, Black aspirations and Black strength makes her autobiography one of the most widely read narratives about the Black experience. The physical torture inflicted upon the Blacks is a black mark in the world history and it has terrorised a complete race to such an extent that they remained almost mute unable to fight the hegemonic white masters. The reviviscence of the blacks propelled them to fight for their emancipation, identity and equality. Maya Angelou portrays not only the racist policy of the hegemonic white Americans but also deconstructs the social paradigm to expose the marginalised status of the African American women too. The double consciousness, double marginalisation and the resultant interiorised inferiority and the existential anxieties are graphically recorded in the autobiographies of Maya Angelou.*

**Key Words:** Reviviscence, Double consciousness, Interiorised inferiority

Post colonial women's writing generally discusses the social, cultural and political issues which marginalise women based on andro-eurocentric paradigms. Oppression, either based on gender or any other social reason such as economy, colour, caste or community is ubiquitous. Women oppression has not fully been wiped away from the face of the earth. Further, colour and gender biases combined with class conditions has global relevance and a solution for the problem of the discrimination will be quite welcome all over the world. Black, especially, is an internationally relevant subject, because the global economy is

diluting geographical boundaries and causing multi-ethnic groups to mingle with the cosmopolitan people. So the psychological process of overcoming the wounds of the past is to be analysed and it will help these people to adapt themselves in the brave new world where the horizon fades far away and invites them to seek, to strive and not to yield.

The bold and assertive articulations of the marginalised women writers enable them to create a different discursive space. The black women struggled for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously. Their commitment to the struggles is profoundly rooted in their lived experiences and hence the aggressiveness is sharp and lasting. They write to deconstruct the negative stereotypes surrounding their culture and more importantly they struggle for literary recognition from the oppressive dominant literary canon. Their writings become involuntary outpourings about the racial, casteist, emotional and psychological problems confronting the doubly deprived female in an andro-centric society.

The statement that “African American women confront both a woman question and a race problem” (Cooper 134) captures the essence of Black feminist thought for generations. The black women’s experience becomes a special kind of oppression and their suffering in their country becomes racist, sexist and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources. “Genetic research, after all, has demonstrated that ‘race’ within the human species have no biological validity”, asserts Richard Perry in ‘Race and Racism’(Perry 23).

The physical torture inflicted upon the Blacks is a black mark in the world history and it has terrorised a complete race to such an extent that they remained almost mute unable to fight the hegemonic white masters. The reviviscence of the blacks propelled them to fight for their emancipation, identity and equality. McPherson argues that writing is: “One of the major forms Blacks have used to share their views to leave a record of their struggle, to inspire future generations and to portray individual life as an embodiment of the larger experience of Black Americans”(3).

Women, the most oppressed community in the history, had begun to activate vigorously to become the most articulating community who could subvert conventional norms. They found a platform to redefine their identities and recast their images in new moulds through their writings: “It is the writer’s great contribution to create new images that will overcome the negative psychological images we have because of our history. I don’t think the political thrust can be really effective until there is a new thinking on the part of the black woman”(Marshall 27). Women writers from the minority group celebrate womanhood exposing female culture, and writing for them becomes an act of self-definition and self-expression where they break the conventions to fill the lacunae with their scripts. They realised the need for active struggle to resist oppression and attain individual and group empowerment.

The description of black women was so prejudiced and so they have decided to write an autobiography for themselves which gave them a self-determined identity. Angelou's emphasis on Black social conditions, Black struggle, Black aspirations and Black strength makes her autobiography one of the most widely read narratives about the Black experience.

As a social historian, Maya Angelou captures the vulgarity of the racist politics followed by the American whites towards African Americans. Maya Angelou was molested at the tender age of six, this drawn herself into the world of mutism. Experimenting to understand the nature of things in life in the world of five years of mutism, Maya read the books of Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe. She even memorises about sixty sonnets of Shakespeare and also read the novel of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which had inspired her to release from the state of self-mute trauma to an empowered woman voice with the power of words that has enriched her creative imagination and has also empowered her story telling ability.

Maya Angelou portrays not only the racist policy of the hegemonic white Americans but also deconstructs the social paradigm to expose the marginalised status of the African American women too. The double consciousness, double marginalisation and the resultant interiorised inferiority and the existential anxieties are graphically recorded in the autobiographies of Maya Angelou. She is credited to have authored a series of autobiographies in six volumes namely *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*(1970), *Gather Together in My Name*(1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry Like Christmas*(1976), *The Heart of a Woman*(1981), *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*(1986), and *A Song Flung up to Heaven*(2002). The last and the seventh volume *Mom, Me and Mom*(2013) was published before she died in 2014.

With the publication of the first volume, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou was heralded as a new kind of memoirist, one of the first African American women who challenged the conventional structure of autobiography. Her second work *Gather Together in My Name* covers her later teen years through her mid-twenties, where she played the roles of a mother, dancer, cook and a chauffeurette. *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry Like Christmas* covers her marriage and her struggle to discover her true self. *The Heart of a Woman* manifests her quest for identity and place in the Andro-centric society. *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* shows her to have developed an even greater sense of connection with her African past. *A Song Flung up to Heaven* opens as Angelou returns from Africa to the United States to work with Malcolm. "All my works, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith, while one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated"(Lupton 45). She vehemently declares through her discourses the need for the black woman to emerge from her lowly status in order to forge a space in the social order and show how the dissenting voices could be heard.

The strategy of 'recalling from memory' proves to be supreme empowering strategy. Recalling from memory, the past experiences and thereby revisioning through an autobiographical account serves as a powerful mode particularly for women to create and embody their subjectivity and identity. Maya Angelou's autobiographical series prove to reclaim her female voice of empowerment through reinvestigating the past through the lens of the present.

Maya Angelou through her experiences and through anecdotes continues her expressions of the white illogical hate which creates a fear amidst black women to meekly support anything for their survival. The saga of struggle and survival and success are chronicled in the autobiographies. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou, in a desperate mood says, "The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of Power"(272).

Thus women are triply jeopardised - gender, class and race. Transcending the level of tolerance or endurance, the oppressed women has learned to turn back to face the oppressor squarely. Thus writings of oppression is a weapon to reveal what has been done to a minority section of people. It becomes a protest, a revelation and propaganda. Generations of sufferings, endurance and survival has imbibed them with new vigour and stamina that there is a parallel presence of forward looking optimism in their writings. A philosophy of life, of optimistic realism, surges out to the readers through out Angelou's works that would certainly register their vision of the futuristic marginalised women.

She employs the traditional narrative techniques of slave narrative, Prison Autobiography, and Travel narratives to weave the saga of survival and success of her self as well as the African American community. She voices out the voiceless by portraying the pathetic, marginalised and segregated lives of the African Americans in the south. She speaks about the resultant aspects of the institutionalised racist policies and the established discriminatory practices and the immeasurable sufferings of the African American community. The practice of remembering and writing or recording leads to the formation of politicised consciousness and self identity. Thus Maya Angelou's Autobiographies are an act of resistance to those who denied the full humanity of people of African descent.

The adolescence of Maya Angelou asserted her individuality against losing the name and identity. She remembered her mother said, "Since you are black, you have to hope for the best. Be prepared for the worst and always knows that anything can happen"(Heart 52). The interiorised inferiority and the fear are emotionally captured in the Joe Louis' heavy weight championship match. The whole black community in Stamps gathered around the store and glued to the radio. She describes the emotional and desperate mood of the community in the following words: " If Joe lost, we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than the apes.

True that we were stupid and ugly and lazy and dirty, and unlucky and worst of all, that God himself hated us and ordained us to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, forever and ever, world without end”(135). But the mood changes and they all feel elated and proud of hearing Joe’s victory and celebrated the occasion in their own ways. “Champion of the World. A Black boy, Some Black mother’s son... Joe Louis has proved that we were the strongest people in the world”(136).

Racism worked through the society and encroached into the schools too. Unlike the White High School, Lafayette County training School for the Blacks trained “Negro youth to be Carpenters, farmers, handymen, masons, maids, cooks and baby nurses. Their future rode heavily on their shoulder”(Cage 143). At the graduation ceremony of Lafayette Country Training School, the hegemonic attitude of Mrs.Edward Donleavy is evident when the white speaker, in a nonchalant way, extolled the Central School and exposed the shortcomings of Lafayette School. The writer recaptures the agony as “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Ganguins and our boys (The girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises. If my brother wanted to become a lawyer, he had to first pay penance for his skin by picking cotton and hoeing corn and studying correspondence books at night for twenty years”(179). Maya Angelou cites another instance of insult when she approached the white dentist, Dr.Lincoln for medical help. He humiliated and insulted the whole black race by saying, “Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s”(189). This proves that racism of the land exhibited utmost vulgarity.

Maya Angelou charts her journey towards autonomy. She is abandoned by her parents, raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Mr.Freeman, and separated from her grand mother. In such suffocating ambience, she struggles to find her self and identity. The search for the self takes her from ignorance to enlightenment, from silence to speech and writing, from racial patriarchal oppression and suppression to liberation and emancipation. At last, she emerges as a formidable character. She in her serial autobiographies emphatically celebrates the black self as well as the black community.

She calls upon the Blacks to rise out of physical pain and psychological cruelties, to rise from victims of rape, abuse and abandonment and to the determination to be no victim of any kind, but to strive, to seek and not to yield. “Rise and be prepared to move on and ever on”(A Song 212). To conclude, Angelou’s autobiographical series continues to serve as an inspiration to the universal womanhood, thereby asserting her ‘self’ as a role model for the entire woman community.

Angelou’s struggle is not the struggle of the individual alone and can be viewed as the struggle of the entire race of black women. She says: “ Growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl and being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat”(3). The autobiographies of Angelou courses through the racial and gender

discriminations and document the intensified and interiorised inferiority which was the outcome of the hegemonic policy of the white masters.

Through the empowering mode of autobiography, Angelou has passed on her empowering strategies to the readers in the present age and also proves to continue her art of autobiography for the future generations too. She strongly upholds that her writings would continue to empower women through out generations. The indomitable will breaks through the political and social barriers to achieve self actualisation. Thus Angelou articulate the discrimination and exploitation levelled against their communities and against themselves as individuals. It helped them to create a philosophy of optimism as a shield to edge forward, resisting whatever is detrimental to the gynec quest of self identity, self assertion and self worth. This act of autogenesis, the process of coming into being from silence into sound, gaining a positive vision of empowerment and hope, is a slow process from marginalised invisibility into central vision.

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