



Struggling and Surviving the Odds: Social Inequalities and the Role of Family as Represented in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Heart of a Woman*.

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Abstract: The selected autobiographies titled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name* unravels Maya Angelou's own life experiences in the broader context of the black community. While these narratives bring to the fore various challenges and struggles experienced by her people, it also opens up the scope of dialogue and change as evident in her own share of literary work combined with socio-political activism. Angelou assumes a critical position while discussing the shaping events in her life and presents an insider's view while bringing her people into the context. Thus, she also highlights the aspects of how black lives uphold resistance, resilience, pride and adaptability through their share of difficulties.

The present paper aims to study the aspects of social and individual identity with regard to the black individual and community in order to locate Angelou's position within the same. It also examines black struggles, as represented in the select autobiographical texts against various systemic social inequalities prevalent in the American society. Further, it analyses the role of family in shaping Angelou's individuality, perspectives and convictions while also highlighting the impact of social inequalities on the quality of black experience and life.

Keywords: Angelou's Experiences, Struggles, Social Inequalities, Role of Family, Convictions and Change

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*"When the winds of disappointment
Dash my dream house to the ground
and anger, octopus-like, wraps its tentacles around my soul
I just stop myself. I stop in my tracks
and look for one thing that can
heal me."*

("Surviving" in *Letter to My Daughter*, 135)

Introduction

The literary contributions of the African American writer Maya Angelou lends itself to a range of critical insights into various significant aspects such as black history and consciousness, their struggles and sufferings as well as systemic social inequalities and discourses that stem from white oppression and power. Angelou's own life story unravels in the broader context of the black community, which not only brings these aspects to the fore but also opens up the scope of dialogue as evident in her own share of socio-political activism. She presents an 'insider's perspective' while bringing her people into the context thereby also highlighting how black lives uphold resistance, resilience, pride and adaptability through their share of struggles.

In this regard, while examining the significance of autobiography and autobiographical novel, Stephen Shapiro in "The Dark Continent of Literature: Autobiography" notes thus, "It [Autobiography] mirrors the infinity of human possibilities and gives us windows through which we can observe the concrete activities of people in all conditions, times and places" (450). Shapiro grapples with the question of truth, memory and literary representation in autobiographies and highlights how the genre projects both the 'public' and the 'private' while also critically positioning the 'self' in the larger 'social context'. Through the series of her autobiographies, Maya Angelou narrates her personal struggles against the backdrop of the larger Black struggle, a continuance from the historical past to the contemporary times, connecting the dots that cannot be ignored or left untraced. Thus, her personal experiences are an extension of the larger black condition and experience as well.

The present paper examines the relevant aspects of black struggles and experiences with regard to social inequalities embedded in the larger American society as represented by Angelou in the select autobiographies. While it takes into account the two above-mentioned autobiographies, relevant aspects and examples are not restricted to these autobiographies alone. The objectives of the paper are to study aspects of social and individual identity with regard to the black individual and community as well as Angelou's position within the same. Further, it examines the struggles that stem from various systemic social inequalities in the American society as evident in the texts. It also analyses the role of family in shaping Angelou's individuality/ persona, her convictions and perspectives while also highlighting the impact of social inequalities on the quality of black experience and life. Therefore, a closed and interpretive reading of the autobiographical texts provides relevant insights into the present study.

Identity

By tracing her own past and recollecting her experiences through the prism of memory, Angelou's autobiographies namely, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013) in particular describe her early struggles of being born black and raised in the racially segregated South under the supervision of her paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. Her second autobiography titled, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) narrates her tryst with the world of crime given the challenges of being a young underqualified woman with added responsibilities of a single (untimely) mother, fending for her child in the big cities of America. Following this, the fourth autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) captures her transformation from being an insecure person and struggling writer to transforming herself into a more confident individual and a pro-active civil rights activist, cognizant of her true capabilities, thereby making a mark for herself and a counting difference to the black community.

As represented in her narratives, both Angelou's own lived experiences and those of her people are replete with several anecdotes and accounts of the colour bar and white privilege, racial hatred and violence, white power and oppression. Such racial conflicts not only trampled their hopes, dreams, aspirations and talent but also had them entrapped in an hostile environment, being marginalised in their own homeland. They not only struggled against all odds that came their way but had to come to terms with themselves and their own sense of identity. Angelou opined that it was almost a 'historic norm' for Southern blacks to remain passive and subdued, to maintain their strict behavioural codes of conduct, that almost became their second nature. It was only during the years of depression that poor black families migrated to the Northern cities in the hope of a better future even if it meant living within their means.

Chris Barker in *Cultural Studies* (2008) discusses the concept of 'identity' as well as the 'self' in terms of multiplicity and even fragmentation. He points to the way we conceive our identities, identify ourselves with it and also become emotionally attached to it, based on a range of our experiences situated in a particular socio-cultural, political or other such context(s). Further, he notes that subjectivity that is defined by the "processes" (215) that determines what it means to be a certain kind of a person is also closely connected with our concept of identity. While looking into the concept of identity, which in general can be divided into individual and social identity, he notes thus,

Identity concerns both self-identity and social identity. It is about the personal and the social. It is about ourselves and our own relations with others... Identity is not a fixed thing that we possess but a becoming. It is a strategic cut or temporary stabilization in language and practice. We may understand identity as a regulatory discourses to which we are attached through processes of identification or emotional investment (Barker, 245)

Angelou's own search for 'identity' begins with both her and her brother Bailey Johnson being sent back on a train to the South by their parents with only 'identification tags' on their wrists and without proper supervision, which was also the case with many black children during that time. Her questions on identity began with this rude shock in life, with the unexpected experience of being displaced and left to suffer her own set of insecurities at the tender age of four as she wrote, "[i]f growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" (*Caged Bird*, 9)

During these early years at Stamps, the only reminder of her parents' existence were the gifts that they sent all the way from California. Both the children experienced feelings of being unwanted and abandoned for reasons unknown, which also reflected their acute sense of separation-anxiety as children. It was only much later in life that they had learned of how their parents had struggled to sustain themselves and save their marriage with the only comfort that atleast the children were in safe hands. During these early years in the South, they came to terms with the existence of hatred, violence, lynchings, victimisation, exploitation and oppression affected the life of Southern blacks. Given the fact that the qualitative experience of an entire community could be altered by their racial identity, Angelou through her more matured years chose to override it through the celebration of her identity/identities and inspire her people towards the same.

Struggling With Social Inequalities

Angelou's self-consciousness particularly with regard to her identity, colour and what it meant to be born black, had become more acute during her early years in Stamps, Arkansas. It was here that she had witnessed someone as tough as her grandmother who wielded so much power over their lives became powerless when it came to her interactions with the whites. As a child, she saw the way her people were subdued, silenced, confined, restricted and controlled by the white people. This was evident in the existence of segregated spaces, exclusive white access to public spaces, separation of churches, white privileges at school, bias in the work sphere or unjust laws. Racial oppression was insidious and deeply embedded in the white consciousness that ruled their world. She saw the power of privilege or how a person could be treated a cut above the rest owing to their colour for an instance, in the case of her own mother who was relatively lighter skinned, being an "octoroon" (*Mom & Me*, 1). This further explained her privilege over others, her police pull and the fact that Vivian Baxter was taken seriously by whites and blacks alike.

Significantly, Barker discusses how the concept of 'race' which is determined by one's biological and physical characteristics such as skin colour becomes a criteria for determining one's worth or value in the social structure. He notes how the same is extended to assert power and authority or rather "...used to rank 'racialized groups in a hierarchy of social and material superiority and subordination'" (247). Angelou represents such racial prejudice by mentioning an anecdote from her childhood when a white doctor named Dr. Lincoln who was known to Momma had simply denied Angelou (then a child) medical aid despite her excruciating pain, simply on the grounds of her colour. This was the same man who had borrowed money from Momma on a few occasions as well and let alone empathy and gratitude, the doctor did not even have the basic sense of ethics, given the profession that he was in. This presents the white man's sense of 'superiority' as well as 'hypocrisy' that would always surface in some way or the other.

Racial prejudice and hatred were deeply embedded or coded in the white consciousness and ideology to such an extent that it affected their race relations, at times reaching to the point of crime, violence, racial tension and social unrest. Infact, Angelou wrote that the heights of negative experience in the South meant “droughts, floods, lynchings and deaths” (72). Thus, drawing from her early experiences itself she wrote,

In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included in the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed. (*Caged Bird*, 24)

The prevalence of various social inequalities particularly, race, gender and class, as evident in her autobiographical texts points to the problems of equal opportunities and representation that extensively affects the quality of black life. Angelou had realised that not only were black people treated as ‘second class citizens’ in their country, that their own ‘ancestors’ had equally helped to build but their basic ‘human rights’ were violated and denied as well. Besides, the system is seemingly structured in such a way that blacks were left too disadvantaged to be able to pursue the ‘great American dream’ or even dare climbing the social ladder in the white dominated American society. Angelou in highlighting such inequalities and unjust practices expressed her angst thus, “[w]e were maids and farmers, handyman and washerwomen and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous” (*Caged Bird*, 140). Infact, she takes a step ahead in highlighting the plight of racism against all black people across the world who were at the receiving end of white oppression and politics on a larger scale which she had described thus,

Whether we were in the mines of South Africa, or the liberal New York theatre, nothing changed. Whites wanted everything. They thought they deserved everything. That they wanted to possess all the materials of the earth was in itself disturbing, but that they also wanted to control the souls and the pride of people was inexplicable (*Heart of a Woman*, 807)

While discussing how social constructs operate in society, Barker points to the “plasticity of sex and gender” (285) where one's biological sex does not necessarily fix or determine one's gender identity. Infact, ‘identity’ can never be pinned down to one single fixed framework it is always open to pluralities which is why an individual can have multiple identities. Further, these identities can again crisscross or intersect, influence, interact or even create conflicts. Barker in taking up various aspects of identity notes the play and occurrence of intersections with regard to gender as well noting that, “[g]ender intersects with race, ethnicity and nationality to produce different experiences of what it means to be a woman” (283). Infact, Barker also points to the inevitable intersections of the social markers of race, gender and class.

Angelou had witnessed how poverty had affected the black families in Stamps, Arkansas although the Economic Depression did have an impact on the poor whites of the town as well. Although, Momma owned a modest general store, she was able to lend money to both blacks and whites alike during these difficult times. Infact, the store thrived well in the middle of Stamps, which buzzed with the gathering of the working class like the cotton pickers or barbers or even troubadours. However, life was difficult for the most of the working class black men and women for an instance, the cotton pickers toiled hard at the fields but were paid too little to sustain themselves. They did not have enough to pay off their bills or pay their outstanding dues to Momma at the Store let alone make payments at the white Commissary.

Black Southerners faced financial difficulties due to such exploitation of labour, meagre income, lack of job opportunities and to top it all, they were hard hit by the recession. Thus, post World War II, many black families migrated to the North in search of better opportunities. For an instance, Vivian Baxter was a trained nurse who made extra money by working at gambling parlours until the time she came to own her own hotel and gambling businesses. And yet, she held various certificates to her credit, in case circumstances demanded her to switch her profession or alter her work. This spoke of her foresight and readiness or how prepared she was for any kind of situation that might crop up in life. Similarly, in her teens Angelou had a string of jobs from being a chauffeur to a cook, a car painter to a bar dancer to mention a few in her long work profile which again points to her sense of adaptability and the determination to survive in a difficult world.

A black woman was never really safe out in the streets or inside her own home which explained why women like Vivian Baxter or Angelou herself who were almost always outdoors, tended to wield a pistol as a weapon of self-defense. Angelou too expressed a nagging sense of insecurity whenever she imagined being cornered in the streets by men and thus, she created a story in her mind, which she thought would instantly repel such men and thereby protect her from being a victim. However a naïve story was not enough for one's protection and the fact that she as a child was raped by Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend and that it had all transpired within the confines of their home itself points to such vulnerability. In addition, her family had to look after the needs of the family had a family, her businesses to attend and miles to travel or fly for work for which she could not be around to protect Angelou at all times. The same was seen in her own case when Angelou herself found herself struggling with menial jobs and shifts to be able to protect her little baby from being kidnapped by her babysitter.

Here, it is important to mention that although white oppression and power controlled and affected black lives, yet there were many issues and problems that existed within their own community as well. Angelou highlighted several such aspects for example, expected gender roles in black families; crime committed by black people on their own community; or the underworld dominated by black men, where black women were treated as money magnets or mere pawns in their underhand dealings. Yet, she describes the generosity of black people who in the ghettos would go out of their way to help each other despite themselves and their own pressing needs. She noted that the whites had it all easy and as she wrote how she envied at times, "...their wealth that allowed them to waste" (*Caged Bird*, 41). She wondered how white folks had no idea what it was to be poor, oppressed, hated, violated and tormented for most part of history well into the present. Yet, Angelou was determined to struggle against all inequalities that sought to cage her identity and larger purpose in life. In addition, it meant that she would position herself as a black women representing her people and walking in solidarity with them towards social change.

Role of Family

Angelou as a teen who had just graduated high school, found it awkward and difficult to confess of her untimely pregnancy. Besides being unprepared for the arrival of her baby, she was fearful of being judged, shamed and once again abandoned for her condition, which made it difficult for her to divulge the truth to her family. It was only two weeks before her expected delivery that her stepfather and mother who had been away for long, came to learn of the same. Though teen pregnancy was not unheard of among her people, it was mostly unacceptable to many families in the conventional sense, which further explained her guilt and fear. However, Vivian Baxter upon her return had taken the entire situation into her hands, approaching her daughter's pregnancy in a practical, matured and the gentlest of ways. It was from this precise moment on that both mother and daughter realized the importance of their roles in each other's life.

In the Black neighbourhoods, both men, women and children struggled hard for their sustenance. Given the lack of job opportunities and the prospects of good education and career, many families faltered and were engaged in the underworld, in criminal or deviant activities or serving time in prison. Angelou too had a brush with the underworld owing to her own gullibility particularly in her relationships with men in those circles and many a times due to her own naivety. However, the bonding and loving support that she shared with her Momma, her mother and brother Bailey always kept her anchored from all the dangers that many black young women like her were exposed to. Although, the members of her family were all independent and lived life on their own terms, yet their bonding, practical witticisms, humour, experiential knowledge and the worldly wisdom that they shared held them together.

The Baxters too were closely knit and stuck together, being caring, protective and holding each other's back at all times. No one dared to mess around with them for they were feared given their unity, sense of defiance and their way of being. While the Baxter's including her mother were known to be headstrong, outspoken and free-spirited, Annie Henderson was a God fearing, good old soul who stuck by her virtues and moral codes. In fact, she had instilled a sense of fear in her grandchildren convincing them that the less they spoke or responded to Southern white folks, the safer they would be. However, with the passing of time Angelou had realised the motherly concerns hidden behind those words for it was her grandmother's protective act of sending her away from Stamps that had saved her from any harm or untoward incident. Despite it all, what

she had unlearned and relearned was that it was one's 'voice' rather than silence that held the real power towards transformation and progress.

The complexities of life in South held the power to unleash psychological fear and scarring for an instance, living at the mercy and watchful eye of the Ku Klux Klan, which literally terrorised the black psyche. It explains why a Southern woman like Momma was so protective of her own differently abled son, Willie as well as her two grandchildren who were unfamiliar with the norms of the segregated town. Given their race and social position, Southern blacks were vulnerable and easy targets or victims in the hands of the whites. The southern way of life demanded a strict code of behavior and mindful living without ever having their roads crisscrossed with the white folks. Thus, Angelou wrote,

The Black Woman in the South who raises sons, grandsons and nephews had her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose. Any break from routine may herald for them unbearable news. For this reason, Southern Blacks until the present generation could be counted among America's arch conservatives. (*Caged Bird* 89)

In one such instance, when their part of the town had received the news that the Klan was on the look-out for a black man who had dared to take liberties with a white woman, Momma's motherly instinct led her to protect Willie despite his innocence. Angelou remembered simply following Momma's instruction and hiding their Uncle Willie in a large bin, covering the poor fellow with potatoes and onion for his own safety. No black man was safe that night with the Klan out on their search for the unknown guilty man.

Years later, Angelou was at the receiving end of her mother's protection as well when she was literally kidnapped and brutally assaulted by her abusive lover. Vivian Baxter had gone out of her way to rescue her by using her contacts. And in one instance, she had even given away her pistol to her daughter, prompting her to kill the man without having to worry about serving prison time even for a day. The same way Angelou's son Guy Johnson, an introvert and a sensitive young black boy has received death threats from the 'Savages' who were feared even by the police. Yet, she had confronted the head of this violent group warning them with her pistol to keep away from her son. This reflects how black women who were themselves so vulnerable stood their ground when it came to protecting or defending their own family. Thus, drawing from her own experiences she writes,

The black mother perceives destruction at every door, ruination at each window, and even she herself is not beyond her own suspicion...In the face of these contradictions, she must provide a blanket of stability, which warns but does not suffocate, and she must tell her children the truth about power of white power without suggesting that it cannot be challenged. (*Heart of a Woman*, 655)

Angelou admits that even as the comfort of her mother's home always welcomed her, she held that as a sense of security in a difficult world and yet chose to build her own life on her own terms without any sense of dependence on her family. Interestingly, as a black woman activist in the public domain, her idea of family had expanded as she worked with Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, leaders and freedom fighters from across the world.

Conclusion: Convictions and Change

Being a black American woman came with its own set of challenges and 'insecurities' in every sense of the word. Yet, their participation in the family front, work force or social movements points to their independence, resilience, self-empowerment and the determination to both struggle and survive. Siphokazi Koyana in "The Heart of the Matter" (2002) notably takes up the cultural differences of African and Black American women that define their experiences both within and outside the sphere of the family noting thus,

Angelou, writing between the late 1960s and the mid- 1980s set a new path by showing how black families often serve as barometers of social change and as forerunners of adaptive patterns that will be progressively experienced by the more privileged sectors of society as they lose their privileges. (44)

Further, Koyana draws from Patricia Hills Collins on how black women were always engaged in work both within the public and the private space, whether it was 'professional work' or the term that Collins uses "motherwork" (36). Thus, Koyana writes, "Angelou's autobiographical works attempt to reveal the multiple and dynamic interconnections between households-home and family- and the larger political economy (35). Moreover, the traditional family structure of black people was hierarchical and patriarchal in nature with its roots in family systems of African people (37). In addition, Koyana opines that as black women worked shoulder to shoulder with black men and especially their spouses to fend for their families, they always had a "more egalitarian relationship" (41) with their male partners.

Black history itself is witness to how black women have always broken out of their own shells or comfort zones to break stereotypes, to adapt to myriad challenges that emerged from their home front, their ghettos or the nation. They have always broken out of these limitations to exercise their own will like Angelou who chose to be free from any kind of restriction or imposition on her by a partner (for an instance the African activist Vusumzi Make). She travelled from one end of the world to the other in search for her African roots, stood by two major Black leaders in the Black struggle for freedom, established herself as a significant voice of her time and yet held her family together through the toughest of times.

Infact, Angelou knew that she was living in a time that would prove to be historic and she believed in passionately fighting for the Black cause in her own capacity for it was not limited to American blacks alone but Africans and all people of colour across the world. In one such instance, she shares her reflections on a conversation with a friend thus, "I told him we were living in exciting times and that because of the United Nations, Africans and oppressed people from all over the world were making New York the arena where they fought for justice" (*Heart of a Woman*, 729).

Angelou held a strong personality and intellect shaped by her reading and experiential knowledge and she was an individual who celebrated her black identity and her people whom she represented through the treasures of her writing. She seemingly had a fluid approach to the entire notion of identity as exemplified by her narratives. For example, at one instance Angelou is seen to be at ease as an economically independent black American woman living in her own homeland and in another instance, she chooses to assume the role of the traditional African wife fighting for the larger black cause while also searching for her African roots. Thus, she weaves in and out of her own notions of social and personal identity, refusing to be 'defined' as she was convinced that she would not let anyone define her position and would reinvent herself on her own terms.

Again, Angelou's family played a remarkable role in shaping her personality for she imbibed qualities from both her grandmother and her mother who were poles apart by nature but were similar in their resilience and firm resolute to survive with dignity despite all odds that came their way. The issues of social inequalities that surface from the autobiographical texts only point to the nature of constructed ideologies that reiterates the power equation between the oppressor and the oppressed. However, Angelou's exemplary life, literary and social contributions point to the power of self-conviction, the courage to deconstruct social inequalities, the will to work for social upliftment and to usher in positive change. The autobiographies and life writings of Maya Angelou thus, chronicle her eventful life that is exemplary and empowering in itself, one that is inspiring and calls for an informed reading as well as the kind that holds the power to question and pave the way towards change.

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