



WRITING AS SURVIVAL: AN ANALYSIS OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORKS OF MAYA ANGELOU

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Abstract

Autobiography which is a self-written account of the life of oneself shares the first-hand experience of the person focusing on the traumas, pains, pleasures and struggles through which the person traveled so on and so forth in his journey of life. Maya Angelou's autobiographical works probes in to her personal and private realities all through her works. Angelou's throughout her journey becomes more politicized and develops a new sense of identity-Identity as a mother-Identity as a Black. In this phase of her life she places the focus upon herself and uses the autobiographical form to demonstrate the effects of Civil rights movement in her literary and personal career. Angelou through her writings transformed herself as a woman, mother, and the American who passes victoriously towards the path of self-realization.

Keywords: Autobiography, trauma, survival, resistance

As the definition of Autobiography goes, autobiography is a self-written account of the life of oneself. Thus an Autobiography shares the first-hand experience of the person focusing on the traumas, pains, pleasures and struggles through which the person traveled so on and so forth in his journey of life. Like the novel, autobiography too shows an interest in human nature but there is no freedom of invention as in a novel. An autobiographer pursues the truth about himself from within the self. Hence a good autobiographer should be a good craftsman too so as to appeal to the readers.

Maya Angelou's autobiographical works or rather series reflect her own image in its truest sense of the term. She probes in to her personal and private realities all through her works. She recounts her arguments, memories and desires in a dream-like style. This soul-baring memoir touches the very conscience of every human being with the realities

of tragedies faced by the author. Angelou through her autobiographical series chronicled her remarkable journey and inspired millions to accept life as a challenge and enjoy the piths and falls that it carries.

An autobiography seems suited to the study of Women's literature as many women have written letters, journals, diaries and stories of their lives. Virginia Woolf and Maxine Hong Kingston have taken the writer's self as subject matter to illustrate how a writer's gender can affect her writing the autobiography. Maya Angelou got inspiration from her author friend James Baldwin to focus on autobiography that could easily be transformed into a piece of literature. Her autobiographical cum fictional masterpiece throws light not only on her unique psyche but also on the Civil right movement, Black motherhood, Racism, familial ties and bonding and also importance of personal freedom and

choice. "But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage can seldom see through his bars of rage his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing". (Angelou 13)

Angelou's autobiography exceeded the bounds of a mere story telling of personal life to explore subjects relating to universal social issues like identity, racism and freedom. The image of the bird struggling to escape from the cage forms the central image of the work. Thus the cage and bird becomes symbolic of torture, resistance and need of freedom. "The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still and his tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom".(Angelou 86) This soul-bearing memoir touches the soul of every human being with the realities of tragedies faced by the author. Angelou through her works has chronicled her remarkable journey and inspired millions to accept life as a challenge and enjoy the piths and falls of it. Angelou's treatment of racism is the highlighting factor of this book. "I stood dumfounded, founded in dumbness". (Angelou 96)

The emergence and struggles of self-hood in her breathtaking autobiographical series and the next version *Gather together in My Name*. The young lady or rather girl facing the hard cruelties of the world with her new born can be visualized in *Gather together in My Name*. The optimism which garners up soon disappears as Angelou faces the reality of taking care of her son and herself. She easily becomes a victim of poverty and crime as a single mother, trying hard to raise her voice, raise her head but eventually gets defeated by the opportunists. She sings her pathetic state throughout her life's journey "I thought at the time that it was noble to bear the ills one had silently. But not so silently that others didn't know one was bearing them".(Angelou 110)

The trajectory of struggles and self-hood continues to play cruel drama in Angelou's life as she jots down the same in her work "*Singin' and Swingin' Getting' Merry like Christmas Quotes*". The possibility of suicide was surfacing at every incident happening in her life. But her firm determination for an unexplored life made her travel through her

tragedies. As she says "Death to the young is more than that undiscovered country; despite its inevitability, it is a place having reality only in song or in other people's grief".(Angelou 134)

Maya Angelou carries with her the pangs of an Afro-American mother in *The Heart of a Woman*.

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn, As a love blind, soft winging, so restlessly on, Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home. (Angelou 56)

Angelou's throughout her journey becomes more politicized and develops a new sense of identity-Identity as a mother-Identity as a Black. Thus she becomes more attracted to the causes of Black militants is the US and Africa, to a point of entering into a relationship with a significant militant and becomes more committed to activism. In this phase of her life she places the focus upon herself and uses the autobiographical form to demonstrate the effects of Civil rights movement in her literary and personal career.

Angelou emphasizes the theme of spirituality in the heart of a woman. The reference to Noah's Arc presents Angelou as a spiritual being like Noah and demonstrate her birth for a cause. Although Angelou's mind and body vacillates to many places, she starts her journey into the self-to reach out the inner meaning of life. *All God's Children Need Walking Shoes* is Angelou's perception of what it means to be an African American on the mother continent. "The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned".(Angelou 96)

Angelou's matures in her role of motherhood to his son Guy. The realization of responsibility of taking care of her son kindles her decision to stay in Ghana. There is mixed feelings of love and conflicts perceived in their phase as she mourns he's gone. My lovely little boy gone and will never return; (Angelou 186). Here Angelou having developed as a woman, mother, American passes victoriously towards the path of self realization.

Maya Angelou's autobiographical account blossomed into creative voice highlighting personal as well as her views on different mediums operating in an around America. Her life lessons provides an in-depth pictures of how prolific she was and the strings that led from one artistic opportunity to the next thereby characterizing her into a bold person of inner strength and aptitude. As she rightly pointed out:

You alone are enough

You have nothing to prove to anybody.
(Angelou 180)

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