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MAYA ANGELOU AND HER AUTOBIOGRAPHIES : AN OVERVIEW



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ABSTRACT

Autobiography is a way of self-expression among the African Americans. Autobiography served the problem of African Americans to bring them out from the hidden world. It is considered as a tribune for many African American writers to express their bitter experiences to the world. The women autobiographies have explored the pains and sufferings while struggling for identity and assimilation. Their images were preconceived, so that autobiography makes able them to create their own identity. Since the past women were considered as inferior, but the autobiographical writing permits

them to ponder deeply on their life stories and to eliminate the negative picture and create a positive self-identity. Being a writer, woman and Black, Maya Angelou has proved that women have ability to write work of art with pure creative energy. Angelou introduced a world of humiliation, violation, displacement and loss through her writings.. Her displacement, which was an integral part of African American life, has intricately related to her quest for identity.

KEYWORDS

Identity, Race, Gender, Discrimination, African-American

RESEARCH PAPER

The African American women writers like Maya Angelou boosted to write about their lives, achievements and defeats and to liberate themselves from the caged in which they were caught. The African American literature has reached the mainstream which has written by the writers and achieved best-selling and award-winning status since 1970s. It has begun to be defined and analyzed. Among these women writers, Maya Angelou is indeed a major figure and her autobiographies have proved the fact beyond doubt. As an African American woman, Angelou has shared her pain, insult, humiliation and disappointment experienced in her life through her writing. She is an icon for all. She worked hard at every step of her life to achieve the equality and justice to all the African Americans like Americans.

Angelou is one of the first African American woman writers who publically discuss her personal life as well as one of the first to use herself as a central character in her books. She is perhaps right to claim that she is the serious writer who has chosen the autobiographical form to carry her work, her expression. She has been duly recognized as being one of the most successful serial writers of the African American autobiography. She dramatizes both the pleasure and plight of a young the African American woman in America's socially segregated society. She has expressed in one of her interview in 1989 that she was the only serious writer to choose the genre to express her. She represents the conviction in African American autobiography which serves as a public gesture that speaks for an entire group of people.

Angelou not only narrates her story of triumph at the personal level but also the voice the trail and tribulations of African American women in the backdrop of racial and gender discrimination. In the endeavor, she has succeeded to document the social history of her fellow women and social economic conditions of the West. She painted her life's journey with bold strokes on a vast and varied geographical canvas stretching from her birthplace in St. Louis, Missouri to North Carolina. Each of these places and the persons which destiny brought into her life helped her growth and evolution. She encountered

many social barriers to maintain a sense of self as she chronicles the incidents that have transported her from innocence to awareness.

Angelou is one of the African American women whose literary work has written in the form of autobiography in twentieth century. She has much in common with Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks* and other women writers. She is the voice of three generations. By the mid-twentieth century, African American women have begun to consistently assert themselves and protest against discrimination. Those women who educated, they were successful in various domains of arts. Far from being passive victims of oppression, they were the pillars of strength in their families where they worked unceasingly for uplift their race. Under the prevailing harsh and repressive conditions, the social, political and economic contribution of African American women is significant. Furthermore, Angelou enabled us to reveal her feeling, conflicts and struggles that she encountered in her life. The African American literature explores the issues of freedom and equality which had been denied from its people from many days in the United States, along with themes such as racism, slavery, sexism, segregation, migration and many more. African-American literature presents experiences of the African Americans from their perspective.

Angelou creates a unique interpretation of the autobiographical form. Her ultimate goal is to write about the lives of African American women in America. Her autobiographies have the same structure of a historical overview of the places she was living in at the time and how she coped within the context of a larger white society, as well as the ways that her story played out within the context. She has successfully demonstrated the integrity of the African American characters as she experienced more positive interactions with whites. She was concerned with what it meant to be an African American woman in the United States but she focused upon herself at a certain point in history.

This Research Paper explores Angelou and her autobiographies in order to analyze the African American autobiographical tradition and the suffering of the African

Americans. Beginning from the slave narratives to the modern writing blurred the distinctions between the conceptions of the African Americans and the White experiences. The African American women's autobiography establishes links between the race and gender in autobiographical outlook. Autobiography has been the unique and common appeal for the African American women.

Angelou faces several traumatic encounters with racism. Though at times she might seem to be coming to terms with her racial identity, the entire autobiographical series replete with such incidents. She speaks of experiencing the ugliness of white prejudice. She fought against racism throughout her entire life. She also presented the effect of racism on children's psychology. On the other hand, Angelou gives the historical background of her time. She says that the World War Second changed the balance of powers. As the war begins between Americans and Japanese, Japanese workers were removed and the African Americans replaced Japanese workers. She realistically has situated the race problem as the crux of the African American existence. The first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, follows Maya's life from the age of three to seventeen and the struggles she faced with racism in Southern States. She encountered many racial issues in her childhood and the stem from the overt racism of her white neighbors. Though momma was wealthy, the white children had humiliated her badly. In another incident, Momma hid Uncle Willie in a vegetable bin to protect from local goons. Maya endured the insult of her name being changed to Mary by a racist woman. A white speaker at eight grade graduation ceremony has disparaged the African American audience by suggesting that they had limited job opportunities only in sports. A white dentist had refused to treat her tooth, even momma had loaned him during his depression. The African American community of Stamps had enjoyed a moment of racial victory when they listened to the radio broadcast of Joe Louis' championship fight, but generally they felt the heavy weight of the racist oppression.

Angelou's autobiographies recapture her own experiences. Throughout her writing, she has described the personal, social, cultural, and historical influences which shaped her life and personality. She explored herself and individual identity and her

relationship with family, the community and the world. Her greatest legacy has lied in her ability to infuse universality into her experience through her literary work. She was victimized by one and all because of her unprivileged birth and upbringing as an African American woman. Her life story has spoken about her unflinching faith in her identity and her strong appetite for the ultimate existence amidst the bitter realities of life. Angelou has made her a distinguished personality in her course of her divergent experiences.

A major theme in Angelou's writing is Motherhood. The African American mothers have been the most sacrificing figure in history of the world. In developing the theme of motherhood, Angelou has applied the same quality of honesty to her role of mother as she did to her role of prostitute; in fact the two tend to interconnect in their elements of pain, struggle, imperfection, and loss. Motherhood is an important concept in her autobiographies, as the motif of the responsible mother. She has become powerful mother. She is no longer torn by self-doubt, but a strong and aggressive African American mother. Motherhood is associated with domesticity for women in America in the mid nineteenth century. After all for the African American women, the motherhood has been permanent part of their work, these women autobiographical writer begun to use it in their life stories. Angelou's experience of motherhood is also inseparably from her work that the theme of motherhood intertwined with her narrating autobiographies.

Angelou's life revolves around the existence of her Son. Her career separated them from each other for some time. It has not chosen for personal enrichment but for providing for her son. Her life has indicated that the most important thing in her life is her son Guy. She has kept her career on secondary level. Even when looking out for a life partner, she was simultaneously looking out for her son. Her relationship with her mother was instrumental in defining her relationship with her son. As far as mother-daughter relationship is concerned, Angelou and her mother have gone through a phase of separation due to their mistakes but gradually they have understood each other.

Angelou has faced the adult world full of wit and determination. She has accepted enthusiastically the challenges of sustaining herself and her son. She has focused to become a responsible woman. She has overcome many obstacles for establishing a sense

of self-mother. The vivid notions of motherhood in American society were uncovered. The African American motherhood was marked as an opponent of racism and sexism that weaken the women's power. Motherhood as profiled in contemporary writers by African American women aimed at a political aspect to combat the racist and sexist tyranny in their communities. Angelou has used motherhood as a dominant theme in her autobiographies both as a literal and spiritual continuation. Her concern on motherhood shows her grandmother Annie, her mother Vivian, her stepmother Dolores, Bailey's failed mother Joyce, her other mother Mrs. Flowers, and Maya herself as a mother continues as indicating the life-circle.

Angelou fought against her husband's patriarchal world which also shaped her under the African American male-hood. In this sense, Angelou's pain doubled by both racism and sexism. It was miracle that after all what Angelou endured, survived, struggled, graduated from college, found the job she dreamt of, and continued on her way toward success. The birth of her son Guy had a positive effect on her as she discovered the meaning of motherhood and the feeling of being needed. Above all, she learned about the power of love and hope for a better life.

Thus, Maya Angelou's autobiographies have created hope and affirmation in the dark discriminative world. God has created the world and everyone with the same interest and purpose, but people have divided it into caste, color, race, superior and inferior and so on and so forth. Being a woman, black and the writer Maya Angelou has tried to give the equal opportunities and identity to the blacks like the whites. Angelou is able to make her readers realize that the human spirit need not succumb to hatred and oppression. She is interested not with mere survival but wanted to survive with grace and style. Her strength has helped her to overcome many hurdles that lay in her way to self-affirmation. Finally, she demonstrates how the colored girl can survive the existing oppressive system without being demoralized by it.

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