

# Racism and Inequality in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name*

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**Abstract**-The paper deals with racism and inequality associated with the African-American society and its Black people. Black individuals, both males and females, face considerable dejection, rejection and oppression residing in a White's society in America. They suffer on all fronts of life right from their childhood to their death. Maya Angelou does not solely preach about equality among different races but stresses on the humanistic ethics and values. In the paper, the first two autobiographies of Angelou are considered for research: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name*. These post-colonial autobiographies can be read for different themes such as race, gender, inequality, identity, discrimination, travel etc. It primarily seeks for self-identity of the Black community in general and her own self-identity in particular. The paper aims to discuss how racial segregation, social insecurities and financial instability can pose a threat to one's spiritual as well as social growth. It also tries to trace how the right kind of relationship is essential for maintaining a peaceful life in a society. In fact, the paper emphasizes Angelou's personal experience/trauma, her transformation from a teenager to womanhood, shift from ignorance to awareness (self-realization). Angelou wished to shun all kinds of discrimination that comes in between an individual's progress.

**Keywords**-racism, inequality, discrimination, trauma, self-identity, personal experience, humanistic.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A contemporary writer uses many literary narrative techniques to put his viewpoints across in order to explore the myriad traits of their characters. One such narrative technique is Autobiographical writing or Autobiography. Autobiography is the biography of a person narrated by that person i.e., a usually written account of a person's life in their own words ("Autobiography Definition & Meaning-Merriam-Webster," 1+). The term 'autobiography' was first used in English in 1797. Some autobiographies are written in the form of a fictional tale; as novels or stories that closely mirror events from the author's real life. Such stories include Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield* (1850) and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in The Rye* (1951), Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903), Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1793) etc. In writing about personal experience, one discovers himself.

The autobiographical writing addresses and emphasizes the socio-political scenario of a particular era. Literature is a favorable medium through which the autobiographical writers can mirror the different social practices and evils of the contemporary society. These writers take the initiative to empower the society by exploring different themes and topics relevant to be narrated to the global audience. According to the White American culture, the black women are considered as the 'other' who speak as marginalized. The knowledge and information shared by these writers through their effective writings explore the social, economic and political status of their characters (as well as their contemporary society).

## II. DISCUSSION

For this paper, I have selected two popular autobiographies of Maya Angelou namely: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and *Gather Together in My Name* (1974). Angelou likes to decorate her autobiographies with different kinds of themes. Her most popular themes (themes that scarred the black community/society) are race, gender, inequality, identity, discrimination, travel etc. The paper will primarily attempt to discuss the two autobiographies based on race and inequality. Through the personal experience/traumatic journey of the black characters, Angelou endeavors to highlight the racial inequality and different toxic relationships that hampers one's real progress. Angelou's protagonists are usually victims of racial prejudice, gender discrimination, identity crisis, economic instability, etc.

Angelou's first two autobiographies, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name* succeeds in creating a distinct place by their ability to represent the black society against the White's society in America. They showed the vulnerability of the Blacks in adjusting into the White people's cultural society that lacks humanistic traits and values.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* begins with Maya and her elder brother moving to Stamps, Arkansas, to be with their grandmother and finishes when Maya turns into a mother at seventeen. She converts herself from the victim of racism into a self-dependent, decent young woman determined to end all prejudices. The events confronted

by the black protagonists in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are due to the evident racism of the Whites. The distressing behavior of the Whites is portrayed when the black people got to know about the Ku Klux Klan invaders, the Whites who threatened the Blacks communities, assassinating, lynching, outraging and thrashing in order to defend the rights of the White Americans. Momma, Maya's grandmother had to hide her son Willie in a potato basket the entire night while the White men scour the Blacks of Stamps for a Scapegoat.

Marguerite like any African-American, in the opening of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was fascinated by the White's life-style. The White American life-style was considered to be superior to any other cultures of the world. She was fed up of being a big Negro girl. She speaks of her dream where she assumes herself to be a White American girl. In her own words she questions, "Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blonde, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten?" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 2). She asserts that a Black's life is full of pain and misery. She often addresses her pain of being black in saddened tone: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her difference is worse. It is an unnecessary insult" (*ibid.*, 2).

Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* stated the many forms of struggle of the Blacks against racism. She acknowledges that the resistances of the Blacks are beneficial for the African-American community in order to enhance/transform their self-identity and self-growth. The Black autobiographical writings usually show the Black women' transformation of personalities from ignorance to self-awareness. They are shown as personalities who undergo personal experiences inflicted by mental and psychological trauma. Joanne M. Braxton in *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook* (1989) depicts the position of Black women in an African-American society. In her words, Black women are "even twice veiled, thrice if she should be a member of a sexual minority" (Braxton, 1989, 4). The Black autobiographical writers especially the woman writers consider their revolutionary ideas for the welfare of their communities.

*Gather Together in My Name* attempts to show the female protagonists of the African-American society, Angelou's contribution to the contemporary African-American society. The autobiography illustrates Angelou's identity as an African-American woman and her awful work experience as a train driver, dancer, cook, prostitute, driver, and the influence of other female protagonists in her life. At a very tender age (seventeen), she had to take some crucial decisions to fit into the male-dominated plagued civilization. She was very concerned to provide a perfect milieu to her three-year son, Clyde. In fact, Maya is so perplexed that she wanted to try her hands at everything just to make herself acceptable in the society and find perfect love. In this period, she even preferred to be pregnant. She declares in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, "I hefted the burden of pregnancy at sixteen onto my own shoulders where it belonged" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 284). She never made excuses or blamed no one but herself. Like many of Angelou's autobiographies, the autobiography emphasizes Angelou's unceasing self-introspection.

Angelou's characters in *Gather Together in My Name* are very impulsive and possess strong willpower to explore themselves with every new experience coming their way. But occasionally, their search for new experiences in life compel them to choose paths jeopardized by crime and other distasteful profession. Lauret points out these weaknesses in Angelou's characters. Thus, Lauret (1994) states that *Gather Together in My Name* "depicts a single mother's slide down the social ladder into poverty and crime" (Lauret, 1994, 120).

In *Gather Together in My Name*, young Maya at the age of seventeen, now the mother of a son, looks for a job and seeks independence and recognition. This work records Maya's emergence into the world of vocation. In the pursuit of economic stability, she works as creole cook, prostitute, dancer, fry cook. It introduces us to a world of prostitution, con men, street women and drug addiction. It is a striking example of how capitalism drives its victims to the brink of extinction. One may break down under the pressure of society or work assiduously to maintain one's dignity. Maya opts for the latter. The Maya of *Gather Together in My Name* is the representative of a new class of black women. During the course of time, she transforms. She emerges as a resourceful, capable and tough-minded person. She realizes that there are no free lunches. She is ready to take on any challenge to survive and feels confident enough to apply her intelligence to any reasonable task. She neither comprehends nor accepts failure. She is all set to tackle whatever comes her way. Though a novice in Creole cooking, she does not hesitate from taking the job of a cook and doing it well. She works as a swing-shift waitress. When she gets an offer from R. L. Poole to join him as his dance partner, she readily accepts it. Although the dance routines she performs with R. L. Poole go "largely unappreciated" (*Gather Together in My Name*, 113) by audiences but serve as preparation for future acceptance at the purple onion night club. Variety of employment is no barrier to Angelou. She sees opportunity where others might see oppression. Maya takes charge of her life in the humanistic tradition.

In *Gather Together in My Name*, an incident arises that exposes how Rita and her grandma struggle with racism in various circumstances. Rita was disgraced by a White American clerk, in one of her journeys to Stamps. She answers with contempt, but Momma hits Rita and compels her to return to California once she got to know

about the refusal. Rita acknowledges that her right to privacy has been invaded, but Momma identifies that her granddaughter's deeds are destructive. Rita does not consider her grandmother as a major figure in her life, and Angelou describes that in the struggle against racism, Rita had to proceed alone.

In the White dominant economy Rita looks for economic stability which for a Black woman remains only an unfulfilled dream. She comes in contact with lesbians, hookers, drug addicts. She is again a fragmented individual searching for coherence in terms of independence and stability. The Black community were hopeful that after the World War II there would be a substantial change in the lives of the Black African-Americans. But post World War II, things drastically changed for them who were uncertain about their own welfare along with their family.

Angelou's observations about race and the job market are intended to place the autobiographer within a historic framework. Her personal economic situation echoes the postwar decline of African-American society. At seventeen, Maya is looking for a job that will bring her recognition, money, and independence, but she lacks the skills necessary to achieve these goals in a dominant white economy. She also exposes herself to a number of risky relationships with men – as a dancer, a married man who sells stolen clothes, a vein-scarred drug user and so on. But at the end, shocked and repentant, Angelou, in a promise to reclaim her innocence, abandons her degenerated life.

Towards the close of the autobiography, *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou is filled with pessimism for life and existence. She is disappointed, tired, and vulnerable against all the pains and struggles she has to endure in her life. But when she happens to encounter a drug addict, he identifies her loss and demonstrates her the awful effects of drug addiction. This trivial communication with the drug addict served a significant part in Angelou's identification of her goals and objectives of life. She shuns her distressing life and changes her very outlook towards life. Angelou's conscience awakens and she tries to draw her life back to the real path just for herself and her three years old son.

### III. CONCLUSION

Maya in *Gather Together in My Name*, suffers and get exploited at the hands of many deceiving men but she solely blames herself for the mishaps in her life as she believes that she was too young and fragile to her age. She was being exploited and oppressed throughout by many colored people. She counted on herself to seek her true identity, spiritual growth and self-consciousness. She also speaks of all the jobs she took (in the White's society) to provide a better life to her son. It discusses how she survives from racism in American society especially after her son's birth. Maya was a victim of marginalization from her very childhood. She was discriminated because of her gender and race that make her aware of being an 'other' "undeservedly...relegated to second-class citizenship" (Walker, 1995, 93).

Angelou's autobiographies reveal the prosperity and strength of Southern Black life that continues in the face of poverty and racial bias. This revelation of the Southern Black life is discussed through the representation of the writer's life as a Black teen in Arkansas in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It displays how to change one's own destiny by educating oneself and facing failures bravely. On the contrary, *Gather Together in My Name* explains a young woman's undying efforts and her strive to realize a better life and love in America after World War II in *Gather Together in My Name*.

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