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Theme of Gender and Race in Maya Angelou's Autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Birds*

Sing

Abstract

Maya Angelou is an ambassador of African American culture and a harbinger of writings that shows her quest for self and identity. Her works echoes her concern over racial, sexual issues and the black women's struggle for awareness of self and subjectivity. Angelou stresses the importance of bonds between women as means to contend with racism and sexism and becomes a role-model for millions of women through her writings and her experiences of life. Her writings are the voice of the oppressed women in America and elsewhere, where the poor Africans are discriminated for being born as black and a woman.

Keywords: Gender, Race, Sexism, Self, Identity, Subjectivity

Maya Angelou through her writings expresses the hardships of the growing up of a black woman during the period of racism and hatred. To be a black girl is extremely tragic in

the racist society. Angelou brings out the account of her life with stories that depict the humiliation and struggles resulting from the racism which is prevalent. Maya Angelou struggled and survived both racial and gender adversities.

The term Gender “refers to ways of seeing and representing people and situations based on sex differences . . . It is a social or cultural category, influenced by stereotypes about ‘female’ and ‘male’ behavior that exist in our attitudes and beliefs” (Goodman vii). Weeks emphasizes that gender, as related to “the social differentiation between men and women” (367) must be understood as different from the term sex, which “refers to the anatomical differences between men and women” (367).

The Oxford Dictionary defines racism as the “belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races. Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on belief that one’s own race is superior”.

In her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged....* Maya Angelou was subjected to racism, rape, grief and dehumanization. She faced not only one adversity but many together like racism, rape, financial problems, marital problems and above all the brunt of being a woman and she survived every adversity and became stronger with each passing day. As a child of eight years when she was raped by her step father she remained mute for almost five years and later this girl grew into a confident woman who became the voice for millions and established her identity in such a powerful way that Bill Clinton in his speech said that “she was the voice of God.” Her journey from this mute girl to being the voice of god was full of challenges as the first African American woman to operate a cable car in San Francisco, a dancer, a cook, to become a nonfiction bestseller, and to have a screenplay produced, she became a multi-talented luminary. She overcomes her identity crisis with each step. She

maneuvers through lives experiences and learns from it. Identity and self were the core of Maya's life. She thought herself as an ugly child but was sure that one day she would wake up as a beautiful white girl. But she left behind these insecurities as a child and learnt that beauty is skin deep and with her confidence she can do whatever she wants. When she was called by a different name, unlike others she could not keep quiet but showed her dislike very clearly. She was rejected for a conductor's job as she was a woman but she stood her ground and got the job. She had to earn money to take care of her son, and being a woman never deterred her path. She did multiple jobs and kept the fire in the kitchen burning. When her father's girl friend Dolores cuts her she runs away and lives in a junkyard for a sometime and learns to live life at her own conditions and becomes more assured of herself.

Her works showcases the coming of age, or woman's bildungsroman in each narrative in her autobiographies. Her life from a very young age is shown in a colourful tapestry with every twist and turn in her life. Her tryst with racism and gender disparity starts at the very beginning of her life when she is born to a black a mother who is separated from her husband. The very first incident of her childhood narrated in the autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird sings*", she in the church while staging an act and forgetting her lines stands boldly and asks "What you looking at me for, I am not going to stay." This confidence and strong headedness foreshadows her future and lets the readers envisage her roller coaster life. Her brother and she are bundled up to her grandmother to a place called Arkansas where she faces and was forced to learn in very early stages of life that she was different and beneath the whites. The segregation of the whites and the blacks was complete in this small town. "She didn't cotton to the idea that white folks could be talked to at all without risking one's life. And certainly they couldn't be spoken to insolently. In fact, even in their absence they could not be spoken of too harshly unless we

use the sobriquet “They”.”(47).The children could not even buy a vanilla ice-cream except on July Fourth. The psychological trauma she had to undergo because of her parent’s divorce is well minutely narrated in the autobiography. All of a sudden her father pops up and leaves them at her mother’s place who used to live with her step father. And here is the time when she was raped by her father. Maya recounts every detail painstakingly of the whole act, which she believed to be the love of a father. This rape also establishes how she felt deprived by a father figure in her life. Maya’s insecurity and identity crisis drove her to Mr. Freeman and after his murder, the little child put herself into lot of psychological trauma that lasted for five years thinking that she was a bad omen and who ever came into her contact would suffer or die like Freeman. “Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they would curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended” (87).

There are many subtle but very defining moments in Maya’s life that established in a naïve and innocent child the roots of racism and the fact that she was different. In her eight grade the guest of honour demeaned the blacks in his speech and Maya says As a species we were abomination all of us’’. (189) Later on she faces many other acts of racism like when she went to a dentist with her granny, the dentist Lincoln refused to treat her and insulted her by saying that he would rather stick his hand in a dog’s mouth than a negro’s. The insults faced by her granny and Uncle Willie at the hands of whites further reinstates her feelings of racism. Later in her life as an adult she tries to fight against racism in her own way and gets strength from the revolution of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. This resolution of hers never to bow down or surrender before people or circumstances makes her outstanding among millions.

Sexism is another offshoot that Maya faces and fights against all her will and might throughout her entire life. Sexism makes women subservient and as Simone de Beauvoir says Woman is never 'self', but always 'other'. Maya not only does not allow herself to succumb to sexism but with force establishes her sexuality and stands tall amid the tales of torture and discrimination. She in the very tender age of sixteen tries to set her ideas about her gender and sex at place and gives herself to a neighbourhood boy that results into her pregnancy before her marriage. Though it was a very common thing for a black woman what makes Maya different was she gets ready to become a mother willingly and later takes care of her son in a befitting manner. She does not get perturbed by the fact that her husband wants to earn money through her and she gladly becomes a prostitute to earn money and even becomes a madam for a lesbian women. She often fell in love but was dumped after a while to suffer silently. Her affairs with Curley and Poole were in the same league but she never gave up her dream to find a man who would love her and give her and her son the safety of a home. Till the end her dream of finding a man with whom she could settle down remains unfulfilled.

The black women are nipped in the bud at the very childhood and they wrestle for breath since their birth. Black women face double disadvantage as they were black and also a woman. The black women can and could come out of this oppression by whites only by educating themselves and becoming financially independent. W E B Du Bois was one of the pioneers who raised her voice against the black women's oppression. The life of a black woman was only and limited to the four walls of the house and they were denied any entry into the world outside. Their colour was deemed ugly and the whites were glorified all the time. Feminism was also a domain of white women who never thought of allowing the black women were women of the third world into this fight. The celebration of black skin and the beauty stated in late twentieth century with writers like Maya Angelou who celebrated her

life as well as paved way for celebration of other black women like her. She joined the civil rights movement later on to fight for the entire black race but her own life was an adept example of her fight for women. She also gave credence and support to black feminism through voicing her feelings against the oppression in her poems and autobiographies. When in school she experienced many instances of racism and feminism “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises” (Angelou, 179). This difference sets her thinking that why there is disparity between the whites and blacks and also between genders.

Conclusion- As we see through her works Maya was at the crossroads of gender, race, and identity throughout. But she never gave up and fought her battle with her strong will and support of women in her life like her mother Vivian, her grandmother Henderson and Mrs. Flowers. In her quest to bring equality between races and genders and to establish her identity she was supported by men like her father, her brother Bailey, her son and by people like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The values she learnt from these people made it possible for her to take a stand and fight all discriminations with strength.

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