

Ms. Chandni Chhattani

Research Scholar

Banasthali University

India

Email: c.chhattani@gmail.com

Speaking From the Margins: Making Presence Felt

Abstract: This article focuses on the marginalized woman Maya Angelou with special reference set in her memoirs named *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing and Gather Together in My Name*. This paper aims to show that how Maya Angelou a prominent Afro – American writer is marginalized and how despite confronting racism, sexism, classism and gender issues she was capable of making her presence felt by the world. Her way of living life has become a message for black women to reconstruct their self and identity. In light of the concept Black feminism Angelou lesser the burden of other Afro – American women who were cloaked in the burden of slavery. She felt her presence strong and established her relations with others during difficulties. Angelou's works reveal the horror of colour discrimination and marginalization which cause writhe in agony. Thus delivers the message that one should stand for one's identity and defy the harassment and torture.

Through her struggle of life Angelou felt her presence very strong and given the importance to 'self' and changed the meaning of life. Angelou speaking from margin about her

experiences as a marginalized woman. The maltreatment, coarseness, tribulation, prejudice, identity, victim of rape, displacement and seclusion consequences of which is the wisdom, power and the will she attained in order to survive happily. In each stage of her life she had gone through a trauma and each trauma strengthen her to come out from the difficult situations.

Angelou in her memoirs centralizes her own self and enjoy the independence by giving the

importance to 'self'. So the present study intends to show how being a black woman Angelou resisted all the oppressions and abuse and made her presence felt.

Keywords: Margin, Marginalization, Identity, Self, displacement, Tribulation, Racism, Classism, Trauma

This article focuses on the marginalized woman *Maya Angelou* with special reference set in her autobiographies named *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing* and *Gather Together in My Name*. Maya Angelou originally named as Marguerite Annie Johnson is a prominent Afro- American writer. She is not only a prolific writer but also a versatile dancer, great singer, competitive director, captivating actor, an excellent producer, compassionate teacher, true struggler and a woman of honour. Her "mission of life was not only to survive but also to thrive". (<http://www.languageinindia.com/aug2014/deepamayaangeloufinalpdf>) She is popular as "the black woman's poet laureate". (<https://www.poeticous.com/maya-angelou>) Angelou dedicated her life to put an end to the discrimination against the black females. Throughout her life, she endeavoured to remove the slavery through her poetry, songs, films, acting and directing. She also wrote a series of autobiographies focusing on her childhood and the difficulties she came across in her life.

Angelou has been a victim of marginalization. At the age of three, Angelou along with her brother was separated from her parents and lived with her grandmother in the town Stamps Arkness. Maya's separation from her parents was the biggest reason for her low self- esteem. She traveled throughout her life in search of home. Arkness is a racially prejudiced area and it is

divided between black and white people. Being at the margin, it was difficult for Angelou to write and be the central character in her memoirs and talk about her marginalized experiences. She was not only the woman in a man's world but also a black in white's world thus, being marginalized from the greater part of the society.

According to the anthropologist Victor Turner, "Marginals are simultaneous members of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from and often opposed to one another. What is interesting about these marginals is that they often look to their group or origin, the so-called inferior group, for communities and to the more prestigious group in which they aspire to higher status as their structural reference group". (Salve, 137)

In sociology, marginalization is the social process of becoming or being made marginal, to relegate and confine to a lower social standing, outer limit or edge. Marginalization positions gaps and silences a person or group, and denies mainstream status. In its extreme form, marginalization could exterminate groups, and refers to, being separated from the rest of the society, forced to occupy the fringes and edges. Thus, marginalized people are considered as not part of the society. Many communities experience marginalization, with reference to colour, caste and gender. Today, various communities continue to be marginalized from society due to the development of practices, policies and programmes that meet only the needs of the Whites or the Upper castes. Whiteness, caste and class maintain and enforce norms and discourse. The marginalized or subaltern groups are forced into a new system of rules, face social stigma from the dominant groups in society, which further marginalize and exclude them.

Angelou as a marginalized woman speaking about her experiences in her autobiographies. In the memoir *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings* the words 'caged birds' symbolically refer to her freedom, which is bound by race gender and class. Angelou grows in a belief that whites are superior to blacks. She yearns to be a white girl with blond hair and blue eyes so that she could be considered beautiful as per the parameters of whites. She feels that being black she is undervalued by the society. But her grandmother's devoutly nature strengthens her and helps her to develop a strong morale. Her grandmother's endurance reinforces in her, the values of African – American Families and makes her presence feel strong. Maya faces racial discrimination at many instances. She faces discrimination at the dentist clinic that demeans her

with the following words: put his “hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (*I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings*, 160); but the warm- hearted grandmother defies the humiliation of the white rude dentist which encourages Maya to be strong. At the age of 10 when Maya gets her first job she experiences her first personal discrimination when she is continuously referred to as Mr. Cullinan Mary instead of Maya. Despite racist hiring policies, she conquers to become a first black street car woman –conductor. Angelou is aware of the fact that, being an American black woman she would face the problems not only associated with adolescence but also racism and sexism. The process of enduring the discrimination generates inner strength within her and she feels like a strong woman. This is she makes her presence felt despite being marginalized.

Racism and segregation play an important role in the life of Angelou. Though surrounded with condemnation, she deals with all social injustice bravely. She is raped when she was eight year old child by her mother’s boyfriend named Mr. Freeman. Being black she is exploited and faced sexual mistreatment by men. The trauma of rape that took place in her life makes obvious that how being a black woman she is abused from her childhood to adolescence. Maya moves to around seven places and at each place she feels oppressed and degraded. At the age of sixteen, while reading a lesbian novel titled *The Well of Loneliness* she takes a crucial decision to have sex with a boy in her neighbourhood in order to discover her sexuality (whether her inclination was towards lesbianism or heterosexuality). As a result of her indulgence in the sexual act, she becomes pregnant. Being an unmarried black mother she confronts many hindrance and works as a bar servant and prostitute in order to raise her child. While seeking a job she is humiliated by Mr. Edward Donleavy who says that only house- keeping is available for coloured race people. Therefore, she is in a search of home. Oppression does not overpower upon Angelou and she painted her image as a strong and self –confident woman and made her presence felt.

In her second work *Gather Together in My Name* she struggles as a single black parent. This memoir narrates the story of Guy’s initial years in Stamps and California and Angelou’s struggle to achieve love and respect. At the age of seventeen she struggles to get a job in the world of whites. During the World War II it was a fierce challenge for Angelou to make an honest living in the dominant white economic world and raise her child in the loathsome white world. Angelou’s marriages ended abruptly; moreover collapsing her beliefs about men and

their love she lives unsuccessful relationships. In her poem “Surviving” she says, “Each time my search for true love leads me to the gates of hell” (Angelou, 2009: 136). Her feelings and dreams were shattered. Despite all the struggles she carries the burden of motherhood and womanhood beautifully and making her presence felt. In the opening of this memoir Angelou is aimless and she plays many roles and becomes dancer, cook, waitress, madam etc. and takes a range of experiences not only being black but being black single mother. The pressure of earning and surviving creates a feeling of tempt towards smoking, love for drugs, and indulgence in becoming a whore consequence loss of self- love. The world becomes callous for her. Due to displacement Angelou struggles with disappointment, guilt, anger and the differences that she finds in American culture and her reality as an African American. But, as a woman rather African- American woman she developed her ‘self’. Her racial heritage instead of making her feel doom encouraged her self- reliance which made her presence feels strong.

Angelou feels disgust when she is degraded by her name. She could not tolerate when she is called ‘nigger’ it is deeply wounded to her. It provides a sense of identity in the hostile world which can erase her individuality. Maya could sense the danger when she is called a black person. It is insulting for her. Once she has the confrontation with a clerk in a general merchandise Store in Stamps when she is returning from her Grandmother Henderson’s house. At that time Angelou was misnamed by a Southern black as Margaret instead of Maya. This makes Angelou off, and she responses recklessly and impulsively. She says “I slap you into the middle of next week if you even dare to open your mouths again” (*Gather Together*, 77). The incidents that happen in Angelou’s life show how dangerous life could be for African Americans. Her bitter experiences of her life have given future acceptance to Angelou. She accepts all the challenges to survive and tackle whatever comes in her way.

Angelou goes to Stamps, to meet Momma Henderson. During her stay, Maya goes into the white area of town to purchase a sewing pattern. It is a hot southern day, so hot that Maya’s “thighs scudded like wet rubber” (*Gather Together*, 75). At the store a saleswoman blocks her entry. Maya realizes that she has become too racially liberated to accept the restrictions of the white community. At the same time, Grandmother Henderson has remained fearful of white intolerance and continues to adhere to the unspoken rules concerning whites. Grandmother slaps

her rebellious grandchild again and again, ordering her to leave from Stamps for her own protection and the baby's. It is the last moment of contact between Grandmother and Angelou.

This memoir deals with a young black mother who is looking for a way to survive with a racial heritage. Since, her childhood she observes her grandmother as a victim in the presence of white folks. Therefore, she wants to remove the racial inequality from the south. 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”. “Racism and discrimination have been used as powerful weapons encouraging fear or hatred of others in times of conflicts and war, and even during economic downturns.”

Angelou being a black woman is not only excluded from taking education but also faces oppression of race, class and gender. Maya Angelou through her struggle of life learns how to live life on her own and feel her presence strong she says: “every door is not only locked, but there are no doorknobs ... the children need to know you can stumble and fumble and fall, see where you are and get up, forgive yourself, and go on about the business of living your life” (*Gather Together*, 45)

Conclusion

Thus, the paper aims to show that how Maya Angelou a prominent Afro – American writer is marginalized and how despite confronting racism, sexism, classism and gender issues she is capable of making her presence felt by the world. Her way of living life has become a message for black women to reconstruct their self and identity. In light of the concept Black feminism Angelou lesser the burden of other Afro – American women who are cloaked in the burden of slavery. She feels her presence strong and established her relations with others during difficulties. Angelou's works reveal the horror of colour discrimination and marginalization which cause writhe in agony. Thus delivers the message that one should stand for one's identity and defy the harassment and torture.

Through her struggle of life Angelou feels her presence very strong and gives the importance to 'self' and changes the meaning of life. Angelou speaking from margin about her experiences as a marginalized woman. The maltreatment, coarseness, tribulation, prejudice, identity, victim of rape, displacement and seclusion consequences of which is the wisdom, power and the will she attained in order to survive happily. In each stage of her life she has gone through a trauma and each trauma strengthen her to come out from the difficult situations. Angelou in her memoirs centralizes her own self and enjoy the independence by giving the importance to 'self'. So the present study intends to show how being a black woman Angelou resisted all the oppressions and abuse and make her presence felt.

Bibliography

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, New York: Random House, 2004.

Print.

Angelou, Maya. *Gather Together in My Name*, New York: The Modern Library.

Salve, J. "The Theme of Marginality in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*." *Literature of Marginality Dalit Literature and African-American Literature*. Ed. N. M. Aston. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001. 137-143. print.

Electronic Sources

"I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing" (Angelou) Book Reviews): *litlovers.com*, n.d. Web.

15 July 2016. "Maya Angelou's Advice to Young Women Seeking Power". *The Story*

Exchange.org., n.d. Web. 20 June 2016.

Available: <http://thestoryexchange.org/maya-angelousadvice-young-women/>

"Maya Angelou": *poeticous.com*, n.d. Web. 20th February 2016.

Available: <https://www.poeticous.com/maya-angelou>

Shodhganga : a reservoir of Indian theses @ INFLIBNET". *Shodhganga.com* n.d. Web.

15 March 2016.

<http://ietd.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/handle/10603/20448>