
Maya Angelou: A Scribe of Life

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“I should not talk so much about myself, if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.”

-Henry Thoreau, *Walden*.

More than three hundred years were to pass for the African American race to prove the above lines equitable. In his seminal work *From Slavery to Freedom*, John Hope Franklin has charted the history of the African population’s forceful voyage to the Americas, referred to as the “middle passage”. This one-way passage was the rare, unheard and unseen of tragedy in the history of human-kind; for the Africans who were carried as slaves to the New World were considered lower than the animals. In the ship they were chained together, with little room to move in this long and painful journey. The mortality rates were high, as the epidemics spread due to the filth and stench; of those who did not die managed to commit suicide by leaping off the ship to avoid the enslavement. Millions were exported to the America to work in the plantation systems, with few evidences of humanitarianism. For the slave owners it was cheaper to import a number of slaves required rather than to preserve their life, so the inhuman treatment of slave became a governing system. These slaves, men and women alike, were made to labour in the fields all day long; and any hint of pause for relaxation would render them with the severe beating from the overseers. Collectively this race suffered from the inhuman and barbarous treatment for centuries.

The passage from slavery to become a scribe of their own life was a taxing task for the African American men and women in terms of history, culture, society, and politics. Ironically enough, the self-representations of this physically and emotionally exploited race have been those of inspiring and elevating the human spirit. The knowledge of the Word being the pre-requisite of writing one’s life, it became the genesis of the strenuous yet revitalizing journey of the African-American autobiographers.

Traditionally this mode of self-narrative has been the arena of established, known, public figures of significance, one may say, a zone of White man. The self-narratives of white women also came secondary in position, and the black males were identified much later. This situation

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conveniently neglected the existence of women, and thereby the self-narratives written by them. Needless to say, the black female; who remained at the bottom of the race hierarchy, was not on the chart, until recent years. The black female is an oppressed individual from the three tiers consisting of white man, white women, and black man. The black female was violated physically, mentally, emotionally, and also spiritually. Since the days of slavery they have been denied the right to live with dignity and integrity; even post-slavery, their position did not achieve its deserved and desired platform. Just like their existence, their voices have been muted through colonization. The colonized women of different race, nations and cultures were categorized as negligible or marginalized community. Initially their attempts to voice themselves were thwarted with oppositional forces and power dynamics of patriarchy in politics, social and cultural spheres. This scenario has affected the identity formation of black females and thereby, their self-representation. The black females have traversed an extensive and strenuous journey to mark their unique identity as black women of substance.

This is an attempt to analyze the self-representation of the African American race's descendant daughter, a black female, Maya Angelou. Thereby it is an attempt to recognize the ability of a triply marginalized woman to celebrate humanity. At the outset of establishing Maya Angelou as a 'scribe of life' it must mirror the individual's 'truth' in his/her self-narration. Further, as Angelou belongs to that tradition her predecessors, the inaugural authors of self-representation must be analyzed. She has her distinct style of treatment; the examination of African American narrative is necessary as it has travelled from slave-narrative to self-narrative. The following section, analyzes the element of truth, and further as mentioned earlier, the plantation system of American society forbade literacy to slaves, then their journey from the pre-requisite of 'word' to self-representation is remarkable. Thereby, Maya Angelou's literary and aesthetic significance gets realized.

The very fact that an individual attempts to write as literature, and chooses to write in the autobiographical form, deduces that the written piece of work is a piece of his/her "life" on the pages. Through this medium, readers can connect themselves with the narrator in the autobiography. Now, when an autobiographer is from a tripartite marginalized category, subdued by race, gender, and class prejudices; they opt for this form to narrate their experiences, and thereby uphold their selves and their race. A Black female belongs to this category, which is subdued by race, gender, and class prejudices. The constructive and collective literary efforts have rendered the Black women writers with their distinct identity. As stated above in the words of Langston Hughes, they "write" themselves. The "Black and beautiful" race voices its rebel against racial discrimination, oppression from slavery, and masculine prejudice. After a long and torturous history of injustices and neglect; the black women, "sing" and celebrate themselves. An American White man's thought on autobiography fits squarely to the African American Black women autobiographers. The literary form of autobiography renders the proximity to the readers of diverse race and culture in understanding and relating to the voices of black women. In turn the form provides a fertile land for the black women autobiographers to sow the seeds of their culture, race, history, and tradition to grow and yield fruits of being "known" and "respected" for their unique survival against all the odds. Through autobiographical works, the black writers have created a distinct literary tradition in the world of letters. However, the genre of autobiography especially for the African American race does not render its due merit with the establishment of truth in autobiography. It does not deter one from the fact that the black women

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write about themselves in order to uphold and celebrate their identity. This “identity” historically stems from numerous atrocities faced by them, then which are the qualities that they possess, that make them celebrate themselves. If a black woman metaphorically can be considered a “bird in a cage”; They “sing” of universality, this study examines that how private experiences can be transferred into universal, to stir the emotions universal to the humankind par the differences of race, nation, class, and gender. This analysis can achieve its authentic results through the study of autobiography, more than any other literary form; thus an autobiographer who has a sequel of autobiographies affirms her position in the genre. The act of self-representation, as for any form of writing begins with the ‘word’, thus the following section establishes the tradition inherited by Maya Angelou, and her advancement to her revitalizing self-representation.

Maya Angelou (April 4, 1928 to May 28, 2014) was a multi-faceted personality. Her autobiographies inevitably bear her life as she lived, which can be better understood by her biographical glimpses. Angelou’s journey prior and to her autobiographies and later is well captured in the book with a fitting title, *Maya Angelou: A Glorious Celebration*. She was raised in Stamps, a segregated town of Arkansas and came a long way to become a highly regarded and celebrated figure of African-American women’s tradition.

Angelou was an autobiographer, poet, playwright, songwriter, singer, dancer; she has written, acted, and directed works for the stage, film, and television. She was multilingual, fluent in six languages; she has been an editor, journalist, and political activist. Though Angelou never attended college, she had been a recipient of over fifty honorary degrees, in recognition of her work; she took pride in being called Dr. Angelou. In the year 1981, Wake Forest University appointed her as a lifetime Reynolds Professor of American Studies. The highest recognition of Angelou came, when in 1993, the President-elect William Jefferson (Bill) Clinton asked her to write and deliver a poem at his inauguration at the White House. Angelou read her specially written for the occasion poem “On the Pulse of Morning”. Maya Angelou became the first poet to be ever invited for the ceremony; since Robert Frost at President Kennedy’s inauguration ceremony. Apart from being a recipient of many awards and recognitions, two stand distinctly; portraying the arena of her reach and work. In the year 2006, Angelou received the Mother Teresa Award for her devotion and service to humanity; and in 2011, President Barack Obama presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her meritorious contribution to the cultural and world peace endeavours. At her heart and in her autobiographies; Angelou remained an unwavering woman, mother, and writer; writing in legal yellow pads, always in longhand.

One of the basic reasons, why Angelou chose to write an autobiography was a challenge posed to her by the editor of Random House, Robert Loomis. He made two calls to Angelou, proposing to write an autobiography; which she refused, stating that it was not possible for her to do so. In the third call to Angelou, Loomis mentioned that it was right to refuse because it is almost impossible to write an autobiography as literature. The very moment, instinctively, Angelou agreed and accepted the challenge. Historically, “autobiography” which was meant for the person of “significance”; Maya Angelou, an ordinary black woman, with some extra-ordinary mettle attempted it; in itself it was a break from the stereotype. Further, she made the form of autobiography, as the basis for writing prose, poetry, essays, and cookbook. Maya Angelou’s sequential autobiography spanning the years from 1930 to 1969, chronological in order and six in number; provides the basis for this study.

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I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970) is “greatly responsible for the revitalization of African American autobiography.” (Carter 854) The copyright of this first volume of autobiography of Angelou was provided in 1969, in the year 1970, it was released publicly by the Random House. This volume received its nomination for the National Book award. The title is taken from a verse in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem; about blacks’ struggle to be free from the racial cage and sing of freedom, called “Sympathy”. In this first installment of autobiography, Angelou reconstructs her childhood. She is sent away to her grandmother in a racially segregated town Stamps, Arkansas; and for the most childhood years she is raised there. Angelou’s teenage sexual encounter culminates in motherhood. At the age of seventeen, she gives birth to a son. This installment ends, with a beginning of the mother-son relationship; which becomes the unifying element throughout the sequence.

Gather Together in My Name (1974) begins with the backdrop of the Second World War, at a personal level, Angelou shows her struggle to win herself over prostitution and drugs. This segment shows how Angelou, a black girl, a young mother, with no advance schooling; manages to survive in the American society of 1940s. Angelou changes many jobs to bring financial stability; she gets entangled in the relationships with men who take advantage of her naivety, and her responsibility as a mother, also bears in her psyche. Amidst this chaos, Angelou continues to define herself as a black woman. This segment witnesses Angelou’s most personal and bold confessions; and yet they relate to the universal and “known” secrets of the individuals irrespective of race, nation, class, caste, age and gender. This segment ends with Angelou regaining her innocence and moves forward to rebuilding her bonds as a mother; continuing it in the next volume.

Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas (1976), the title is suggestive of Angelou’s singing and dancing career that is portrayed in the book. Her break-through came with her playing the role of “Ruby” in the black artists’ opera *Porgy and Bess* which toured Europe and Africa. The title is inspired from the local practice of black people in the America of 1920s and 1930s; they would arrange rent parties on Saturday night that would go on through the next morning; singing, dancing, and enjoying, preparing their own selves for the coming week. However, the experiences which Angelou has charted are laced with the conflicts between her career in show-business and her duties as a mother of a young son. At the end of the book, she reconciles the conflicts by pledging to remain with her son always. The next segment continues her further journey of motherhood and womanhood.

The Heart of a Woman (1981) defines the womanhood for Angelou. She is approaching her thirties, maturing as a woman, reviving her motherhood, beginning her career as a theater actress, as a political organizer, and as a writer. The poem by Georgia Douglas Johnson, titled “The Heart of a Woman” becomes the title of this autobiography. It is suggestive of the love and stability Angelou seeks as a woman, from her husband; but realizes that it was yet another “cage” for her. Her son Guy has reached adolescence; no longer in “need” of his mother, departs for his university education. This segment ends with Angelou focusing on “herself”; and begins her quest for her identity.

All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986), a quest that begun in the prequel continues by the charting of her four-year sojourn in Ghana, Africa. Angelou’s physical journey to Africa,

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results in her virtual location of her ancestral roots. A Negro spiritual has inspired the title of this autobiography, “I’ve got shoes, you got shoes / All of God’s children got shoes”; it refers to the spiritual journey, and for Angelou it is a journey towards her roots. She enhances her understanding of the African culture, rituals, traditions, and political scenario.

A Song Flung Up to Heaven (2002), the reason behind the gap of sixteen years before Angelou could write this autobiography is, that she had to cope with the horror of losing her dear ones to death; it was agonizing for her to revisit that history. This segment marks two personal losses to Angelou, due to the assassination of two great leaders; Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Angelou lost her brother-friends in them. The true worth of her character gets realized when she deals with the immeasurable loss and eventually goes on to write her autobiography. Angelou rounds up the series of her autobiography; by ending the series at the time when she began writing her first autobiography. She has taken the title again from Dunbar’s “Sympathy”; as it befits the events in the autobiography and also renders an organic unity to the series. Two years after the publication of this volume, the collection of her six sequels of autobiography was published as *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (2004).

The length and depth of her autobiographies and her life, Maya Angelou, without any exaggeration can be considered rightly as **a scribe of life**.

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Conflict of Interest

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