

**“A BIRD’S- EYE SURVEY ON BLACK BIRDS” IN SELECT WORKS OF MAYA ANGELOU**

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**Abstract :** Literature being a springboard to women issues, where we could evaluate the multiple personalities and dimensions of the past old-fashioned ones and the newfangled ultramoderns. The proclamation and the scrutiny is due to their adversity, misfortunes, hardships they encounter in the mankind. Women play a discrete role in the area of literary studies and an area of specialization where they claim their own rights. They use literature as a tool to open the doors for the exploration of identity and demanding changes in the social and political norms of the society. The Neoliberal Globalization paves way for peace, prosperity, social justice, democracy, environmental protection and to put an end for racism and ethnocentrism in the growth of women empowerment. The montage of female role models taken under discussion in this paper is portrayed in the autobiographical novels of a “America’s Renaissance Woman”. Angelou used the image of a bird trying hard to rescue from its cage. Of course, the imagery well suits the femininity. Her feminine personalities undergoes traits such as individualism, racial discrimination, family relationship and selfness. Angelou also parodies some of the strong women in her autobiographical novels, through her personal experience as both her life and work are fully entwined. Angelou is the one who has the courage to break the patriarchal conventions to enjoin women to deferential silence.

**Key concepts:** Globalization, Empowerment, Liberation, Femininity, Discrimination.

**Introduction :** Subjectivity and autobiographical tinges not only reassert an economy of control but also manifest feminist psyche in the control of femininity. Angelou epitomizes ‘woman’ on three levels; universal, racial and biographical. At the ‘universal’ level, She does not reduce herself into a sexual model of woman rather as a whole human being with the openness of a complete personality. She knows how to position a woman as a human being to some psychic state, as discussing the role of women she asserts: “The woman who survives and intact and happy must be at once tender and tough” (Angelou 1993). She is more self-aware human and representative of women from the position of silenced, deprived and unprivileged.

In African-American poetry ‘gender’ has become a prominent sign of resistance especially because it has unified the concept of ‘black’ and ‘female’. “Black women became realities only to themselves. To others they were mostly seen and described in the abstract, concrete in their labor but surreal in their humanness” (Angelou 1998). She knows and has suffered the anguish of slavery, segregation and racism. “Black women wrestled with the un-escapable horror of undergoing pregnancies that could only result in feeding more chattels into the rapacious man of slavery” (Angelou 1998).

The romantic notion that a writer writes in response to internal imperatives go hand in hand with the notion of feminism in her poetry. However, Angelou is an exception because she not only points to dynamic moving and fluctuant condition of all conscious held biological identity but also the fact of her own specific being. She always lays great

emphasis upon the importance of individual situation especially with reference to the individuality of woman which proves to be biographical. “A woman must resist considering herself a lesser version of her male counterpart” (Angelou 1993). She is conscious of the need of feminist emancipation from patriarchy which is a cultural contract and inevitable for female identity.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which became a great critical and commercial success, chronicles Angelou’s life up to the age of sixteen, providing a child’s perspective on a perplexing and repressive world of adults. This volume contains the gruesome account of how Angelou, at the age of eight, was raped by her mother’s lover. Angelou refused to speak for five years following the attack, believing that she had killed her assailant- who has murdered several days later- simply by speaking his name. Much critical discussion has focused on the correlation between language, speech, and identity evidenced by Angelou’s suppression and eventual recovery of her own voice. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, concludes with Angelou’s attempts as a single, teen-aged mother to nurture and protect her newborn son. In addition to creating a trenchant account of a girl’s coming-of-age, this work also affords insights into the social and political tensions pervading the 1930s.

*All God’s Children Needs Traveling Shoes*, continue to trace her psychological, spiritual, and political odyssey as she emerges from a disturbing and oppressive childhood to become a prominent figure in contemporary American literature. Angelou’s quest for self-identity and emotional fulfilment continues to result in such extraordinary experiences as her encounters with Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther

King, Jr., Angelou also describes her involvement with the civil rights and feminist movements in the United States and in Africa, her developing relationship with her son, and the hardships associated with lower-class American life. *All God's Children Needs Traveling Shoes*, is distinctive and emotional connections with post-colonial Africa. In this work Angelou describes her four year stay in Ghana where she worked as a free-lance writer and editor. The overriding theme in this volume is the search for "home," or what Patrice Gaines Carter terms "a place or condition of belonging." Angelou finds much to venerate about Africa, but gradually realizes that although she has cultural ties of the land of her ancestors, she is nevertheless distinctly American and in many ways isolated from traditional African society.

No Black women in the world of Angelou's books are losers. She is the third generation of brilliantly resourceful females, who conquered oppression's stereotypical maladies without conforming to its expectations of behaviour. Thus, reflecting what western critics are discovering is the focal point of laudable autobiographical literature, the creative thread which weaves Angelou's tapestry is not herself as central subject; it is rather a purposeful composite of a multifaceted "I" who is: (1) an indivisible offspring of those dauntless familial women about whom she writes; (2) an archetypal "self" demonstrating the trials, rejections, and endurances which so many black women share; and (3) a representative of that collective obsidian army which stepped out of three hundred years of molding history and redirected its own destiny. The process of her autobiography is not a singular statement of individual egotism but an exultant explorative revelation that she is because her life is an inextricable part of the misunderstood reality of who Black people and Black women truly are.

In *Caged Bird*, one gets a rare literary glimpse of those glamorous chignonned Black women of the twenties and thirties who, refusing to bury their beauty beneath maid trays in segregated Hollywood films or New York's budding but racist fashion industry, adapted their alluring qualities to the exciting, lucrative street life that thrived in the Jazz Age during the first third of this century.

In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou's message is one blending chorus: Black People and Black women do not just endure, they triumph with a will of collective consciousness that Western experience cannot extinguish. The only change is the urban setting, but the self-reliant woman in control of her environment is the atypical contribution which Angelou makes as a corrective to images of Black women. That the medium is not fiction serves the interest of young readers, who can learn to do likewise. By for the role

model which Angelou presents as having the greatest impact on her own life is her mother, Vivian Baxter, whose quintessence could only be shown by her actions for "to describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 49). With firm velvety command often braced with creative violence, Vivian obviated life's obstacles with anything but sentimentality and she reared Maya to do the same: "She supported us efficiently with humor and imagination. . . With all her jollity, Vivian Baxter had no mercy. . . 'Sympathy' is next to 'shit' in the dictionary, and I can't even read" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 175). That meant she refused Maya psychological and, after Guy's birth, financial dependence:

By no amount of agile exercising of a wishful imagination could my mother have been called lenient. Generous she was; indulgent, never. Kind, yes; permissive, never. In her world, people she accepted paddled their own canoes, pulled their own weight, put their own shoulders to their own plows and pushed like hell. . . (*Gather Together in My Name* 1)

But through the four books, Vivian is Angelou's certain rock, an invincible resource from which the mystique of exultant Black feminine character is molded. Tough, a rarefied beauty, Vivian effectively challenged any stereotypical expectations with which the white world or Black men attempted to constrict her being. Her instructions to Angelou are mindful of the pitiful words in Zora Neale Hurston's novel: "The Black woman is the mule of the world," but Vivian insisted that not one ebon sister has to accept that warrant:

People will take advantage of you if you let them. Especially Negro women. Everybody, his brother and his dog, thinks he can walk a road in a colored woman's behind. But you remember this now. Your mother raised you. You're full-grown. Let them catch it like they find it. If you haven't been trained at home to their liking tell them to get to stepping." Here a whisper of delight crawled over her face. "Stepping. But not on you.

You hear me?

Yes, Mother. I hear you. [*Gather Together in My Name*]

The denouement in *Gather Together in My Name* is again sexual: the older, crafty, experienced man lasciviously preying upon the young, vulnerable, and, for all her exposure by that time, naive woman. L.D.Tolbrook is nothing but a slick pimp, that is his seductive sexual refusals can only lead to a calamitous end; that his please-turn-these-few-tricks-for-me-baby-so-I-can-get-out-of-an-urgent-jam line is an ancient inducement for susceptible females, but Maya the actor in the tragedy cannot. She is too

much in love. Maya, the author, through whose eyes we see a younger, foolish "self," so painstakingly details the girl's descent into the brothel that Black women, all women, have enough vicarious example to avoid the trap. Again, through using the "self" as role model, not only is Maya able to instruct and inspire the reader but sacrifice of personal disclosure authenticates the autobiography's integral depth.

In the next volume, *Singin' and Swingin'*, the closeness between mother and daughter continues. As she matures, Angelou becomes more in control of her feelings and more objective in her assessment of Vivian Baxter's personality. Additionally, the separation of egos that Angelou perceived after locating her kidnapped son would extend to the mother-daughter and grandmother-granddaughter relationships as well. But *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* is, despite its joyful title, a mesh of conflicts- many of them existing within the autobiographical self; many of them involving separations which, although consciously chosen, become unbearable.

Angelou's feelings are compounded by the fact that, as a young, Black, single mother, she alone is finally responsible for giving her child as a sense of stability. In identifying the conflict between working and mothering, Angelou offers a universalized representation of the turmoil which may arise when a woman attempts to fulfil both roles. The frequent references in *Singin' and swingin'* to separation and to guilt give one considerable access to the narrator's complex personality.

Angelou returns from Europe to find her son suffering from a skin disease that is an overt

expression of his loneliness. In a promise that recalls the last line of *Gather Together* (never again to lose her innocence), Angelou vows to Guy: "I swear to you, I'll never leave you again. If I go, you'll go with me or I won't go" (*Singin' and Swingin'* 232). She takes Guy with her to Hawaii, where she has a singing engagement. *Singin' and Swingin'* (242) closes in a sentence which highlights, through its three nouns, the underlying tensions of the book: "Although I was not a great *singer* I was his *mother*, and he has my wonderful, dependently independent *son*." By extension, the rich ambivalence of *Singin' and Swingin'* could only have been achieved by a writer who had abandoned "ignorance" for a conscious self-exploration. Paradoxically, the independent writer/mother establishes this "kind of concentration" in maternal solitude. *Singin' and Swingin'* had ended with mother and son reunited, both dependent and independent.

The rapid pace of women empowerment has become a demanding issue all over the world. Yet the origins of the concept of empowerment goes back to the Civil Rights Movement bringing out a idol paragon of 1960s. A multi-talented personality, a brilliant writer, a fierce friend, a phenomenal woman, actress, screenwriter, dancer, poet and civil rights activist is none other than Maya Angelou is a demigod for the leading conquerors of the contemporary era. Though Angelou had a difficult childhood, experiences racial prejudices and discriminations, she continued to break a new ground not just artistically, but educationally and socially to rebuild the society and enhance the transformation.

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