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Research Paper Literature

Racial Discrimination and Male Psyche in Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

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ABSTRACT

Maya Angelou is an African American writer, actress, and poet. Her works focus on the state of women's lives in a male dominated society. Her first work I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings deals with the problems of Black American women in the years following the civil rights movement, a celebration of Black motherhood; a critique of racism, a quest for independence and personal dignity. The article focuses on the racial discrimination and male psyche described in the novel.

KEYWORDS : racism, sex and gender discrimination

I - Maya Angelou is an African American writer, actress, screenwriter, dancer and poet. She worked as an editor in Cairo, Egypt, taught music and drama in Ghana. She experienced racial prejudices and discrimination in Arkansas. She had done many meagre jobs in her life that most people would judge as wrong. She had smoked pot, taken drugs; she was a madam for lesbian prostitutes, a teenage mom and a table dancer also. When she is asked that all these experiences gave her a rich life, she says that "Yes, but I wouldn't suggest it for anybody. I mean, if you happen to fall into that sort of experience, what you have to do is forgive yourself. If you're in the very gutter, see where you are and admit it. As soon as you admit it, you can be like the prodigal son, the prodigal daughter. Get up and go home wherever home is. Get up and go to a safe place, someplace where your spirit is not kicked and brutalized and your body not misused and abused." (Linda, 2004: 01) Although she had done many jobs, finally she is interested in writing literature. She wanted to become a writer. The chief jobs did not make her unhappy. Indeed, she learnt from them how to survive in the society working hard. At last she has given the preference to literature. She thought that she can change even some of people through her writings. She says that "I want to be a great writer....I'm on the road but I want to be great. The writer has a charge to take words, the most familiar things in the world—everybody in the world says, 'Hey, how are you, good afternoon, how's the children, how's the wife, how's the husband and what about your work?'—just words. The writer has to take those words, pull them all together and arrange them so that they can be balled up and thrown against the wall and they'll bounce." (Speed, 2011: 01) For asking which work is the most challenging one for Maya, she continues to say that "well, writing poetry is the most challenging. And it's the one I love. When I come close to saying what I want to say, I'm over the moon. I pull out a bottle of campaign and treat myself, even if it's just six lines, and they come just close to what I meant to say– yes. But until they come that close, oh my goodness. They worry me like a mosquito in the ear." (Beard, 2013: 02) At the same time, she accepts that opinions are not always same. They will change according to the time and necessity. She thinks that the acting was the perfect job for her when she was acting. Since writing literature gives her immense pleasure, she says that she now likes poetry. When asked what discipline she values above all others, Angelou demurs. "It's not fair of me to say because what I would say today I might change by tomorrow—it's a little like who's your favourite child, really. I am a poet. Everything I write is not poetry; sometimes its poesy. And sometimes it's nothing, it's, 'A cat sat on a mat that's that not a rat'—you know, terrible. But I am a poet, and I was a dancer and, once a dancer, maybe always a dancer. For I still see movement and love movement in buildings and in people walking and in forests. I still see movement. I suppose that if I were 83 and 800 pounds, I would still think of myself as a dancer." (Speed, 2011: 01)

II - James Baldwin, who was a writer, challenged Maya Angelou to write an autobiographical work. Angelou uses thematic development to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and made it very interesting. It follows her life from the age of three to seventeen. She faces particularly with racism in Southern United States. Marguerite, who is the protagonist and the younger version of Angelou, has been called "a symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America." (Tate, 1999: 150) She is called as 'My' or 'Maya.' She explains how she changes herself from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a dignified young woman. Maya was molested by her mother's boy friend, Mr Freeman. Angelou (1969: 23) says that "And then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape upon an eight year old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot. I thought had died. I woke up in a white walled world, and it had to be heaven. But Mr. Freeman was there and he was washing me. His hands shook, but he held me upright in the tub and washed my legs." The rapist Mr. Freeman was put in prison but within a day he was released. Later on he was killed by Angelou's uncles. When she learnt that Mr. Freeman had been murdered, she had a shock that she would be the reason of his death. She became mute for the next five years. In an interview, she is asked by Moore that what she had done in her silence. Angelou (2003: 03) replied that "I memorized poetry. I would test myself, memorizing a conversation that went by when I wasn't in it...I loved Paul Laurence Dunbar—still do—so I would memorize 75 poems." After this incident, she and her older brother Bailey are sent to live with their paternal grandmother called Momma and crippled uncle called Uncle Willie in Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou likes her Momma very much. She and Bailey are haunted by their parents' abandonment. Angelou (1969: 40) says: "My brother, Bailey, was smaller than I. He was two years older but took after my mother's people who were very short, and I took after my father's people who were tall ... Bailey was brilliant. By the time he was 20 he was on drugs, so he never lived up to what he had. I always commend and compliment him for being one of the great mentors of my life." Maya Angelou was spending her days at Momma's home, she has experienced the racism. Momma is a rich lady and she has a general store. White children of the area hassle Maya's family obstinately. Maya bears the insult by a racist employer. When she was at her eighth class, a white speaker affronts all the Black audience. Once Maya gets tooth pain, she visits the doctor who refuses to treat her because the doctor is White dentist. Maya has a close friend, Mrs. Flowers. With her help, Maya learnt to use time and she mostly spent her time in the library. She likes to read the books to pass the time. Maya joins George Washing High School and studies dance and drama on a scholarship at California Labor School. She experiences homelessness for some days. She learns car driving and becomes the first Black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco. During her final year of high school, she worries that she might be a lesbian. She has sexual intercourse with a teenage boy and gets pregnancy. On the advice of her brother, she hides it from her family for some months. Finally she gives birth to a son and accepts her mistake and starts a new life taking care of her son.

III - During the days in Stamps, Maya becomes aware of both the fragility and the strength of Black community. Bloom says that "In stamps Angelou learned what it was like to be a black girl in a world whose boundaries were set by whites." (1985: 4) and continues to say that "But she learned that blacks would not only endure, but prevail."(1985: 4) Maya learned from "Momma""common sense, practicality, and the ability to control one's own destiny that comes from constant hard work and courage, grace under pressure."(1985: 4) She has worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. She might have got the ideas from him. We can see such themes in her works. Since Maya gets older, she is tackled by

more explicit and personal incidents of racism. Regarding the racism, Maya says that "The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic admiration." (Angelou, 1969: 46) Maya has learnt how to pressures of living in a thoroughly racist society have shaped the character of her family members like Momma, Vivian, Bertha Flowers and she strives to overcome them. She bravely resists when she breaks her white employer's heirloom china. She has somewhat resisted against white domination becoming the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Maya suggests others through her writing to protest against racial discrimination and gender discrimination.

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