Research Paper Literature

Quest for Identity-Maya Angelou's i Know Whythe Caged Bird Sings

Mrs. R.S.Sabeetha M.A., (Ph.D), Research Scholar, M.K.University, Madurai

Mr. A.Vigneshkumar M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., Assistant Professors, Arul Anandar College, Karumathur, Madurai.

ABSTRACT

Maya Angelou tries to discover her individuality, identifying her trials and tribulations with the general conditions of the Black Americans in relation to the Black Americans and America. Her autobiographies celebrate the richness of Black life that persists in the face of poverty and racial prejudice. In Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, the young Maya struggles against terrible odds to establish her identity as she grows up into a young woman. Her struggle is made more difficult by three unchangeable facts: she is Black; she is female; and she in unattractive. All three of these aspects of her identity work against her, but she manages to overcome the obstacles they place in her way, and gradually develops as sense of who she is.

KEYWORDS tribulations, racial, prejudice, identity, individuality

Maya Angelou's serial autobiography recaptures her own subjective experiences. Throughout this novel, she describes the personal, social, cultural, and historical influences which shaped her life and personality. She explores herself and individual identity and her relationship with the family, the community and the world. Of course, the divergent experiences which she confronts in her life, represents the stages of her spiritual growth and awareness. Her work echoes her conception of herself as a human being and the survival strategies available to a black woman in America.

Two of the most significant issues she struggles with in her childhood and young adulthood are feeling ugly and awkward and never feeling attached to any place. Maya imagines that even though people judge her unfairly by her awkward looks, they will be surprised one day when her true self emerges. She equates true self to be an angel in a fairy tale, a beautiful, blond white girl. This signifies the racism rampant in the society in which she grows up that has entered her mind. Second, separated and sent away from her parents at the age of three. She feels abandoned by her family.

The childish voice interspersed throughout Angelou's adult reflections suggests that she is probably five or six years old at the time of the opening scene. Growing up as a black girl in the South is like putting a razor to one's throat.It is even worse, when that black girl feels alienated from her own black community; her sense of displacement is like the rust on the razor, making life even more unbearable. She feels that her displacement is an unnecessary insult. Since the opening scene shows that Angelou was aware of her displacement, she takes us through a journey of her childhood full of such insults. Nevertheless, it is significant that Maya manages to escape themocking, critical church community and laugh about her liberation.

As young children, Maya and Bailey struggle with the pain of having been rejected and abandoned by their parents. Maya is tormented by the belief that she is an ugly child who will never be measured up to the white girls. She does not feel equal to other black children. One Easter Sunday, Maya is unable to finish reciting a poem in church, she feels ridiculed and a failure. Maya races from the church crying.

Maya's reversal from disgust to pride during the graduation shows that she has begun to take serious pride in being a member of a resilient black community. Donleavy's speech makes Maya terribly angry. Not even Henry Reed's beautiful speech can pull Maya out of her pessimism. However, he reminds the audience, his fellow graduates, and eventually Maya that they should retain their pride in themselves and their abilities. Maya realizes that other black people have worked hard to provide her with the opportunity to graduate from school. Perhaps more important to Maya's development, after reading literature and poetry, she comes to understand that blacks have written poetry and literature in celebration of black identity and achievement. Maya remarks that, before, she paid attention only to Patrick Henry and other white freedom fighters. Now, she listens for the first time to the words of James Weldon Johnson's inspirational song "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" and no longer considers herself just a member of the graduating class, but also a member of "the wonderful, beautiful Negro race." Maya thanks black artists and poets for helping her to sustain her hope and realize her black pride in the midst of disappointment and discouragement.

San Francisco represents an entirely different world from the rural South. Her education becomes more varied with the addition of drama and dance to her studies. In contrary to the monotony of life in the South, San Francisco undergoes constant change, especially due to the upheaval of the war. Similar to the Great Migration in the East, the defence industry's factories went into full swing in California during the war, and they employed willing blacks and whites alike, especially since the Japanese population had been moved unjustly to internment camps. This harrowing scene of constant displacement becomes, somewhat ironically, the first place where Maya feels a sense of belonging, giving her a new boldness and an awareness of herself. Maya has never felt that she belongs anywhere before, and the constant scene of changing faces in wartime San Franciscowards off her own sense of alienation and isolation.

After moving to Saint Louis to live with her mother and her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, Maya, at the age of eight, is raped by him. Mr. Freeman was sued and at court, when asked if that was the first time he had touched her, she lied and replied affirmatively. On the same day he is released and later killed by 'unknown persons,' might be Maya's uncles. After some time, her family sent the children back to Stamps, and Maya states that

The barreness of Stamps was exactly what I wanted, without will or consciousness…. The resignation of its inhabitants en-

couraged me to relax…. Entering Stamps, I had the feeling I was stepping over the border lines of the map and would fall, without fear, right off the end of the world. Nothing more could happen, for in Stamps nothing happened. Into this cocoon I crept. (89)

Maya experiences important intellectual growth while staying in the junkyard. The experience in the junkyard also shows that Maya's growing sense of independence and confidence in her has begun to coalesce and intensify. Only days before, she surprised herself by driving the car in Mexico, and now she strikes out on her own to spend a month in a junkyard living in a responsibly managed communal society. The intensity of her poise and self-assurance fuels her quest for the position on the streetcar when she returns home to San Francisco. Other employers desperately seek labourers at higher wages without discrimination, yet Maya refuses to give up the job she has chosen. At age fifteen, she has developed a surprising adult will. Once hired, she ceases to live in a world demarcated by black neighbourhoods and continue to rush headlong into the larger world.

Just as Maya's rape appeared to be a direct result of her displacement, in some ways Maya's pregnancy results from her continued displacement from her mother Vivian. Vivian certainly takes Maya seriously when Maya questions her about sex. Vivian does not, however, take an active interest in finding out whether she has answered all of Maya's questions, thinking that everything will be all right once Maya washes her face, has a glass of milk, and returns to sleep. The autobiography ends, however, with an overwhelmingly positive picture of Vivian. Vivian makes mistakes along the way, but she nevertheless survives with the strength and honesty that provide sustenance for and rub off on Maya in the end. When Maya becomes pregnant, Vivian supports and encourages her without condemnation, and she gives Maya her first and most important lesson about trusting her maternal instincts. Maya admires her unflinching honesty, her strength, and her caring nature, despite her frequent fumbling as a parent.

After the end of their marriage, the parents sent Maya and her brother, Bailey Jr., to live with Momma Annie Henderson. Her mother, Vivian Baxter, who enjoyed the big city life of Chicago, could not bear to live in a segregated town or to simply adjust to things as they were. She chose not to stay with her children. Maya is traumatized by the separation and the only way she could cope with the abandonment is to fantasize that her mother was dead because only a dead mother would leave her children alone that way. Maya thinks about her dead mother and the state of mourning in which she and her brother find themselves. According to her "I could cry anytime I wanted by picturing my mother … lying in her coffin" (52).

Believing she is a lesbian due to the changes in her body: her voice is heavy, her hands and feet are not feminine and she is a too-big Negro girl, she decides that she needs a boyfriend to establish her heterosexuality: "a boyfriend would clarify my position to the world and, even more important, to myself. A boyfriend's acceptance of me would guide me into that strange and exotic land of frills and feminity" (280). But what happens is that Maya gets pregnant from their first sexual encounter. Her mother asked her if she would marry the boy to which she answers she would not. Vivian Baxter then gave her the support, love and assurance that everything would turn out fine, a something which Maya had waited for so long and becomes at last, as McPherson argues, "the compassionate, loving mother of Maya's childhood fantasies" (54).

Vivian Baxter then tells Maya, "See, you don't have to think about doing the right things. If you're for the right things, then you do it without thinking" (289). This scene evokes the awareness that Maya has reached. Starting as a girl with a fragmented awareness, Maya moves to the beginning of her growth, constructing her own identity. Through the influence of the women in her life, she actively confronts issues of race and institutions of power as well as "resurrects" herself after her "death" that occurs after rape and learns to accept herself as an African-American southern woman.

The writings of Maya Angelou, a black woman autobiographer, depict her anguish as a poor southern black girl devoid of love and opportunities in the so called prosperous, promising land. Her quest for identity, gradual realization and recognition of black beauty and self-acceptance of black womanhood as well as motherhood are also significantly portrayed in her writings. In fact, she is one of the first African American women who publicly discuss her private life.

REFERENCES

Angelou, Maya. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. New York: Random House, 1969. | McPherson, Dolly. Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou. New York: Virago, 1998. Print. | Lupton, Mary Jane. "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Maya and the Autobiographical Continuity." Black American Literature Forum (24.2) 20th-Century Autobiography (Summer, 1990): 257–276. Print. | | Lupton, Mary Jane. Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion. US: Greenwood Publishers, 1998. | McPherson, Dolly A. Order Out of Chaos. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. |