

Auto-Biographical Elements In Maya Angelou's Autobiographical Poems

Mrs. Sameena Iqbal¹, Dr. Venkataraman²

¹Ph.D Scholar in English (Category-B) Bharathiar University-Coimbatore-46

²Research Supervisor Head of the Department of English, Vels University Chennai –
Tamilnadu

Abstract: *Maya Angelou is one of the illustrious autobiographical poet, historian, lyrist, playwright, dancer, stage and screen producer, director, performer, singer, and civil rights activist. She is best known for her seven autobiographical poems. The themes encompassing African-American poet Maya Angelou's autobiographies include racism, identity, family, and travel. Angelou is best known for her autobiographical poems. Angelou's autobiographical poetry occupies a unique position in her development as a poet. As a child, Angelou went through five years of self-imposed silence after she was raped at the age of seven by a Mr. Freeman, who was subsequently kicked to death by her uncle's. The loss of her voice was a result of the trauma, which made her imagine that her voice could kill. Thanks to her teacher, Bertha Flowers, Angelou started writing autobiographical poetry and overcame her trauma. Autobiographical poetry thus played an essential part in the recovery of her voice, which in turn signaled the success of the healing process.*

Among her volumes of autobiographical poetries are beginning with *Caged Bird* and ending with her final autobiography, Angelou used the metaphor of a bird, which represented Angelou's confinement resulting from racism and depression, struggling to escape its fence. Angelou's autobiographies can be placed in the African-American literature tradition of political protest. Their unity underscored one of Angelou's central themes: the injustice of racism and how to fight it. In the course of her autobiographies, her views about Black-white relationships changed and she learned to accept different points of view. Angelou's theme of identity was established from the beginning of her autobiographies, with the opening lines in *Caged Bird*, and like other female poets in the late 1960s and early 1970s, she used the autobiography to re-imagine ways of writing about women's lives and identities in a male-dominated society. Her original goal was to write about the lives of Black women in America, but it evolved in her later volumes to document the ups and downs of her life.

Angelou's autobiographies have a distinct style and stretch over time and place from Arkansas to Africa and back to the US. They take place from the beginnings of World War II. The main thrust of this research study and the thesis statement falls on Yearning for Independence, Trauma of a Bewildered Woman, Exploration of Aspiration, Quest for Authenticity and Discovery of Ancestry in the respective chapters. The poetries of Maya Angelou show the sufferings and misery, moral and spiritual degradation and humiliating experience of the black people. Her poetries depict realistically the downtrodden blacks and their abandoned colony. It is situated at a distance both from the city where the upper class white people lives. It is a colony of mud-walled cottages huddled together in two rows there live the scavengers, leather workers, washer men and others. Her autobiographical poetry works reflect the real picture of the state of blacks. They also reveal their physical, psychological and sociological issues, their dirt and ugliness, superstition and ignorance, poverty and squalor, ill-treatment denial of opportunity to educate themselves. She is not only

state the problem alone but really sympathizes with the weak and defenseless. The complete theme of Angelou's autobiographical poetry is concerned with the evil of racial discrimination. Angelou's picture of the black people is real, comprehensive and subtle; her gifts in all moods from pathos to tragedy, from the realistic to the poetic are remarkable.

Angelou's auto-biographical poem *O Pray My Wings are Gonna Fit me Well*, emphasis the extra-ordinary abilities of a woman. The title of the poem implies and establishes Angelou's tone of compassionate protest and provides her central theme and metaphor. It leads prospective readers to wonder what such an unnatural life as that of an incarcerated girl would be like for humans, what forms such a "fence" might take in human life, how such a life could produce song, whether freedom would be possible, and what Angelou can tell, from her experience and sympathetic imagination, about the answers to these questions.

Angelou identifies the bars of the obstacles as racism, sexism, and the powerlessness of the victims, whose disabling responses of "fear, guilt, and self-revulsion" merely become additional bars. Whole communities and classes of humans are thus restricted from being fully themselves. Angelou shows how this imprisonment, exactly because it is so unnatural, also naturally produces the response of "song," in the form of struggle, survival, self-affirmation, and at last freedom.

Angelou naturally suggests that, humans are freely expressive. However, she illustrates many restrictions that are placed on expressive selfhood by acts of injustice committed because of self-centeredness and prejudice. When these injustices are experienced during childhood, Angelou explains, persons internalize patterns of understanding that may last for life. Angelou remarks on her own tendency, even as an adult, to feel rage, paranoia, and dread of futility.

Using herself as illustration, Angelou shows how resignation and rage are produced by all-encompassing racist oppression, by omnipresent sexist stereotyping that diminishes the value of any female who does not meet its standards of feminine beauty, and by neglect or violence within families. Describing her sense of temporariness and homelessness (felt even in church, where the congregation often expressed the same feelings about themselves in this world), Angelou tells of having fantasized that her beauty in a white woman's throwaway dress would evoke understanding and appreciation of her worth, thereby awakening her from her "black ugly dream"; instead, she experienced only frustration, humiliation, and fear that she would die. Her early chapters suggest the fairy tale of the ugly duckling; and although it seems that Maya intuited that she was a swan, she nevertheless suffered a crippling loss of self-esteem. Her frequent suspicions that she might be a changeling made her so emotively vulnerable that, for example, she at first thought that a sexual abuser might be her real father, because his attentions gave her a sense of having a real home. Though her dream became a nightmare, again she was misplaced and displaced, and again she was imprisoned in misunderstanding, fear of death, and guilt-ridden silence. Throughout her childhood, Angelou blamed herself for life's injustices.

If Angelou's girlhood odyssey through deathlike psychological depths took her into an underworld (sometimes literal as well as figurative) of race, gender, and family disempowerment, it was in these same areas that she was empowered to seek self-affirmation. The black community of Stamps, although oppressed, gave her a rich culture of language, story, song, religious vision, and faith and brought her together with individuals whose unselfishness and wisdom ensured her survival and growth. Although she was damaged by family experiences of abandonment, neglect, and violence, her family life with Momma,

Uncle Willie, and Bailey in Stamps and with her mother in San Francisco also provided the love that sustained her quest. Although her mother and grandmothers sometimes acted in ways that reinforced Maya's confusion and ambivalence toward life, these same women, and Bertha Flowers, provided not only daily support but also the role models of competent and effective womanhood that Angelou celebrated in her novel and emulated in her life.

Angelo's well recognized poem *Just Give me a Cool Drink of 'fore I Diiiie* illustrates Angelou's aimlessness, drifting through the late teenage years of her. She scarcely seems fit to be a conventional role model in this tale. In fact, as the story of a young woman confused and without direction, the poem might be more appropriately titled "As Marguerite, Rita, Reet, Maya, My, Sister, Sugar, and Miss Johnson" Angelou assumes many personas throughout the story. In addition, she takes on the roles of cook, waitress, madam, army recruit, dancer, prostitute, restaurant manager, and chauffeur. Beyond the book's confusion, however, Angelou offers insight into a range of experiences, providing helpful advice about the pain and trauma of growing up African American and female in the United States.

Angelou, herself the voice of a troubled and often confused younger woman resonates throughout. Yet Angelou does not judge harshly her teenage pregnancy or the drug use, prostitution, and crime that are central elements both in her own life story and in those of the people with whom she comes in contact. It is ultimately with a tone of wisdom and confidence that Angelou shares what she comes to view as the ill-informed and often bad choices she made during these years in her life. After she learned that her child had been kidnapped, she writes, she wanted desperately to cry. Instead, she squared her shoulders and concluded that "I had been stupid, again. And stupidity had led me into a trap where the clash of cultures caused conflicts as the independent activist tried to become the traditional African wife and a homemaker.

Angelou's *And Still I Rise* opened with Angelou and her son Guy living in an experimental commune with whites, in an attempt to participate in the new openness between Blacks and whites. She was not completely comfortable with the arrangement, however; as Lupton pointed out, Angelou never named her roommates. For the most part, Angelou was able to freely interact with whites in this book, but she occasionally encountered prejudice similar to earlier episodes, like when she required the assistance of white friends to rent a home in a segregated neighborhood. Angelou continued, however, her indictment of white power structure and her protests against racial injustice that had been a theme throughout all her books. Instead of offering solutions, however, she simply reported on, reacted to, and dramatized events.

Angelou developed a new sense of Black identity. McPherson argued that even Angelou's decision to leave show business was political and regarded this book as a social and cultural history of Black Americans during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Angelou saw herself as a historian of both the Civil Rights movement and the Black literary movement of the time. She became more attracted to the causes of Black militants, She became an active political protestor during this period, but she did not think of herself in that way. Instead, the focus was on herself, and she used the autobiographical form to demonstrate how the Civil Rights movement influenced one person involved in it. According to Her contributions to civil rights as a fundraiser and SCLC organizer were successful and effective.

Angelou explores her African-American identities were an important theme in her fifth autobiography *Shaker Why Don't You Sing*. The alliances and relationships with those

she met in Ghana contributed to Angelou's identity and growth. Her experiences as an expatriate helped her come to terms with her personal and historical past, and by the end of the book she was ready to return to America with a deeper understanding of both the African and American parts of her character. McPherson called Angelou's parallels and connections between Africa and America her double-consciousness which contributes to her understanding of herself.

In *Shaker Why Don't You Sing*, Angelou was able to recognize similarities between African and African-American culture, blue songs, shouts, and gospels and she has grown up within African –American culture and tradition. Angelou recognized the connections between African and American Black cultures, including the children's games, the folklore, the spoken and non-verbal languages, the food, sensibilities, and behavior. She connected the behavior of many African mother figures, especially their generosity, with her grandmother's actions. In one of the most significant sections of *Traveling Shoes*, Angelou recounted an encounter with a West African woman who recognized her, on the basis of her appearance, as a member of the Bambara group of West Africa. These and other experiences in Ghana demonstrated Angelou's maturity, as a mother able to let go of her adult son, as a woman no longer dependent upon a man, and as an American able to perceive the roots of her identity and how they affected her personality.

Angelou learned about herself and about racism throughout her life. She revived her passion for African-American culture while associating with other African Americans for the first time since moving to Ghana. She compared her experiences of American racism with Germany's history of racial prejudice and military aggression. The verbal violence of the folk tales shared during her luncheon with her German hosts and Israeli friend was as significant to Angelou as physical violence, to the point that she became ill. Angelou's first-hand experience with fascism, as well as the racist sensibilities of the German family she visited, help shape and broaden her constantly changing vision regarding racial prejudice.

Angelou, as a woman, demonstrated the formation of her own cultural identity throughout her narratives. Angelou presented herself as a role model for African-American women by reconstructing the Black woman's image throughout her autobiographies, and has used her many roles, incarnations, and identities to connect the layers of oppression with her personal history. Angelou's themes of the individual's strength and ability to overcome appeared throughout Angelou's autobiographies as well. Angelou's original goal was to write about the lives of Black women in America, but her goal evolved in her later volumes to document the ups and downs of her own life. Angelou's autobiographies had the same structure: a historical overview of the places she was living in at the time and how she coped within the context of a larger white society, as well as the ways that her story played out within that context.

Black women autobiographers like Angelou have debunked the stereotypes of African-American mothers of "breeder and matriarch" and have presented them as having more creative and satisfying roles. Angelou's autobiographies presented Black women differently from their literary portrayals up to that time. The prompt novelistic idea is maintained that no Black women in the world of Angelou's books are losers and that Angelou was the third generation of intelligent and resourceful women who overcame the obstacles of racism and oppression. Her books described one Black woman's attempts to create and maintain a healthy self-esteem. Angelou's experiences as a working-class single mother challenged traditional and Western viewpoints of women and family life, including the nuclear family structure. Angelou described societal forces that eventually expanded to

the white family, and that Angelou's strategies of economic survival and experiences of family structure enabled Black families to survive economically

Angelou's observations about race, gender, and class made the book more than a simple travel narrative. As a Black American, she travels around the world put her in contact with many nationalities and classes, expanded her experiences beyond her familiar circle of community and family, and complicated her understandings of race relations. Angelou's time in Africa made her more aware of her African roots. Lupton insisted, however, that although Angelou journeys to many places in the book, the most important journey she described is a voyage into the self.

Angelou's one of the most illustrious poem *I Shall Not Be Moved* illuminates Angelou's the firm feelings of displacement in the African narrative is interrupted by a journey within a journey. Three years earlier *The Blacks* shocked its off-Broadway audiences with the force of its racial commentary. In that performance, described in *I Shall Not Be Moved*, Angelou triumphed in the sinister role of the White Queen. Now the play was being revived, and Angelou was asked to repeat the role on a limited tour, with performances in *Berlin and Venice*. The consequences of the Berlin journey are analyzed later in this chapter, in the sections on setting and character. In terms of point of view, the German sequence offers a glimpse of Angelou as traveler in an alien land with a history of racial prejudice quite different from what she experienced in America.

Maya Angelou's poems speak of everyday life and situations which readers have experienced or can appreciate because they can picture someone in similar circumstances. Angelou's effectiveness as a poet is based on her ability to tell stories well. The story of her girlhood is composed of many vignettes; her memory when writing them was so vivid and complete that she fills her reader's imagination with sensory details, images, character sketches, poignant remarks, revealing conversations, typical gatherings and goings-on..

Angelou's artistry graces her telling with a lyrical style that often transforms her prose into a song whether sorrow song or praise song of her faith in the beauty and resilience of the human spirit. The subject matter of Maya Angelou's auto-biographical poems is more genuineness and the straight forwardness. She inscribes about subject whom she has seen and experiences and which are important to her. By expansion, they are issues which apply to women, African-Americans, and to all people who are concerned about civil rights and equality which means all members of the human race. Her work offers provisions for thought to people from various backgrounds. The uncompromised quality is her greatest potency and it made her as a world class poet.

WORKS CITED

- [1] Bolinger, David. *Aspects of Poetic Language*. New York: Jovanovich Books, 196
- [2] Cloud, Hardin, M. *An Introduction to the Poetic Discourse in the Auto-Biographical Poems of Maya Angelou*, Essex: Longman, 1977.