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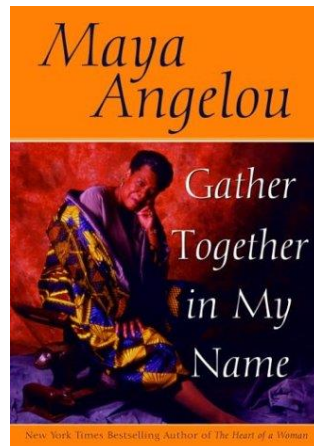
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## Search for Survival and Identity in Maya Angelou's *Gather Together in My Name*

N. Sathiya, M.A., B. Ed., Ph.D. Research Scholar

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## Issues in African American Literature

African American literature is famous black authors known for many talented writers such as Toni Morrison, Ernest J. Gaines, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Walker Mosley, and they are ranked along with the top writers in the United States. Some of the themes and issues explored in African- American literature are the depiction of experiences of marginalized women. They also point to the role of African-American women within the larger American society, culture, racism, slavery, and inequality.

### Maya Angelou and Her Works



Maya Angelou

Courtesy: <http://robtshepherd.tripod.com/maya-angelou.html>

Maya Angelou was born on April 14, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, growing up in rural Stamps, Arkansas, with her brother, Bailey. She lived with her religious grandmother, who owned a General Store. Angelou has been an inexhaustible author for decades. She began her literary career as a poet, she is well known for her five autobiographical works, which depicts sequential periods of her life. The life experiences of the richly talented Maya Angelou are the cornerstone of her stories. Her stories trace the foundations of her identity as a twentieth-century Black American woman.

### *Gather Together in My Name*

Angelou's second autobiographical novel, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) covers the period immediately after the birth of her son, Guy and depicts her heroic struggle to care for

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him as a single parent. She makes a great deal to falsify the oppressive notion of motherhood for working-class women. After the success of *Why The Caged Bird Sings* Angelou takes three-and-a-half years to write *Gather Together in My Name*. This book deals with her travel experiences from San Francisco to San Diego to Stamps back to San Francisco to Stockton and finally to Oakland, all in a brief time-span: An apt title for the book could be “Travel with Maya”. Further, because of her displacement Angelou struggles with feelings of disappointment, guilt, and anger over the variance between the democratic ideology of American culture and her reality as an African American. Her illustrations of self, family, and community displacement thus provide the author the necessary latitude with which to explore the differences of her condition as well as her emotional reactions to those differences. In her search to identify her autobiographical self, Angelou is unmistakable, forced to consider the implication of her racial heritage. Angelou’s dual position as a woman and as an African American ultimately strengthens her development of self. Maya Angelou’s writings, like the individual that she is, are unique, yet they additionally reflect attributes common to African American autobiographical writings.

### **Search for Stability**

*Gather Together in My Name*, is the individual search for stability and security as it recreates Angelou’s first attempt at motherhood, love, drugs, careers, show business, and prostitution against a backdrop of African American disillusionment with American ideology after World War II. What distinguishes *Gather Together in My Name* is the harmony it evokes between the autobiographer’s outward experiences and her quest for inward growth. At the age of seventeen Angelou looking for a job that will bring her recognition, money, and independence, but in a dominant white economy she lacks the skills to get a job. She decides to leave from her mother and step father thus creates a double bind for the struggling single mother, but at the same time she wants to be independent. This novel illustrates her emergence into the world of work, her pursuit of economic stability as she moves from job to job, such as short-order cook, night club waitress and dancer, a prostitute, and madam in charge of her own house of prostitution. Mary Jane Lupton states, “she was able to survive through trial and error, while at the same time defining herself in terms of being a Black woman”. (6)

### **A Question of Survival**

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Angelou states that she wrote the book, in spite of potentially harming the reputation she gained after writing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, because she wanted to show how she was able to survive in the world where “every door is not only locked, but there are no doorknobs ... the children need to know you can stumble and fumble and fall, see where you are and get up, forgive yourself, and go on about the business of living your life” (45). In spite of great difficulty Angelou focused the theme of survival, identity, and admiration of literacy. She describes a series of incidents which are tied together to describe her quest for survival and identity. This book was more painful to write than *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she says, “Because it deals with unsavory parts of my past” (19). But it makes more powerful message of her survival. Angelou should be appreciated for facing and reporting unpleasant situations truthfully.

### **Seeking Solutions**

*Gather Together in My Name* is the segment of daily journeys for seeking solutions. The following questionable characters populate her book: L.D. Tolbrook, a Pimp and con-man; Beatrice and Johnnie Mae, lesbians and prostitutes; Troubadour Martin, a dealer in stolen goods; Big Mary, who kidnaps Angelou’s son; and a sundry sprinkling of junkies. Angelou skirts the edge of the underworld, but her innocence and openness bring out the good in unsavoury people, and they keep her from personal harm. Her life is really enriched by her encounters with the fringes of society. In the opening of the novel, Angelou is black, female, and an unmarried mother with a two-month old son to support. She is without money or job skills. She is seventeen years old and has just graduated from high school. The place is San Francisco, and the time is the mid 1940s, just after the end of World War II. The job market has tightened and easy money dried up, making a living, honest or otherwise, became a fierce challenge. Angelou is still involved with her themes of protest and survival. She protests against prejudice, which shines more lightly upon the male and the white; of the need to survive and raise her son in a world dominated by the “loathsome white”. Her mother, grandmother, and her personal experiences all educate her about whites, but do nothing to lessen her aggravation or to develop within her an acceptance of feeling or acting inferior. During this period, she learns that it is white men who ask prostitutes to do “nasty things”. Furthermore, “white folks are vulgar, and white men are sad as lovers” (141). Angelou writes that the examiner for a test she takes for a telephone job is “A silly white woman who probably counted on her toes” (6).

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## **Abhorrence to Degrading Names**

Angelou understands many of her mother's warnings that enable her to function in the general white world. One thing Angelou is not tolerating, however, is the use of the word "nigger" under any circumstances. It is deeply wounded, whether in a rural or urban setting. For African Americans naming is a sensitive issue. Because it provides a sense of identity in a hostile world that aims to stereotype blacks and erase their individuality and identity. Consequently, given the predominance of pejoratives like nigger so often used to cut down blacks, Maya notes the danger associated with calling a black person anything that could be loosely interpreted as insulting. There is a confrontation with a clerk in a general merchandise Store in Stamps when Angelou returns to visit Grandmother Henderson. At that time Angelou was misnamed by a Southern black as Margaret instead of Maya. This makes Angelou off, and she responds rashly and impulsively. She said "I slap you into the middle of next week if you even dare to open your mouths again" (77). The incidents that happened in Angelou's life show how dangerous life could be for African Americans.

## **Future Acceptance**

Now Angelou is ready to take any challenge to survive and feels that she can apply her intelligence to any reasonable task. She neither understands nor accepts failure. She will tackle whatever comes her way. Her initial works of cooking and routine dance with R. L. Poole is given the bitter experience to Angelou. Then she is ready to prepare for future acceptance at the Purple Onion night club. The different kind of employment is no barrier to Angelou. She finds opportunity where others feel heavy. At the same time she continues her studies through wide reading of literature.

## **Fragmented Life**

*Gather Together in My Name* has an expanded consciousness that enables the reader to identify with an African American woman experiencing life among a diverse class of people including prostitutes. Sondra O' Neale writes that Angelou; "so painstakingly details the girls descent into the brothel that Black women, all women, have enough vicarious example to avoid the trap" (32).

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This book reflects the “alienated fragmented nature of Angelou’s life” (63). The word “fragmentation” used to convey a sense of disconnection. Maya’s fragmentation can be observed in any number of her relationships with her mother, with the women she tries to control with her grandmother, with her lovers. Fragmentation is also a component of her relationship with other women. Maya has a girlfriend, Lousie Kendricks. The book mainly focuses on the lesbian contact between Angelou and Lousie. Maya becomes a madam and the women who work for her, Beatrice and Johnnie Mae, are lesbians and prostitutes. The relationship between Maya and her whores are fragmented, built on distrust, controlled by Maya’s desire for money. The relationship between Beatrice and Maya ends with the quarrel.

### **Racially Liberated**

After that, Maya goes to Stamps, in search of the protective embrace of Momma Henderson. During her stay, Maya goes into the white area of town to purchase a sewing pattern. The day she returns to pick it up is a hot, hot southern day, so hot that Maya’s “thighs scudded like wet rubber” (75). At the store she gets into trouble for talking boldly to a saleswoman who has blocked her entry. Maya realizes that she has become too racially liberated to accept the restrictions of the white community. At the same time, Momma Henderson has remained fearful of white intolerance and continues to adhere to the unspoken rules concerning whites. Momma slaps her rebellious grandchild again and again, ordering her to leave from Stamps for her own protection and the baby’s. It is the last moment of contact between Momma and Angelou.

### **Seeing the Reality of Addiction**

The climax of *Gather Together in My Name* occurs when an unexpectedly compassionate boyfriend, Troubador Martin, who could destroy her life, she learns that he is addicted to heroin. Before it is too late, he shows compassion for Angelou by forcing her to accompany him to a San Francisco safe house where she addicts to inject herself with heroin. While they are there, she witnesses her latest love interest injecting him with the needle - seeing the reality of heroin addicted first hand. Teetering on the brink of destruction, Angelou had a sudden glimpse of the hidden and wretched world in to which she is poised to fall. Dolly A. McPherson remarks:

Entering squalid humiliation and returning from it whole and hopeful, gather together in my name binds pain and humor together through its unique voice. While Angelou knows some of life's pleasure, she also knows its pain and offers up her autobiography as an extraordinary testament of disappointment and celebration. (78)

Realizing her mistake, Angelou separates herself from him and, as the volume ends she is once again ready to accept the challenges ahead for her and her son. Thus the book closes with an experienced Maya preparing to return to her mother's protection: "I had no idea what I was going to make of my life, but I had given a promise and found my innocence, I swore I'd never lose it again" (181).

### **Moral Integrity**

Angelou in *Gather Together in My Name* is a person of potential strength and moral integrity, perhaps even "innocence" who is struggling against the temptations that the fast world of California is holding before her: sex, money, and getting high. This novel deals with the young mother roams the streets of San Francisco looking for a way to survive. Motherhood is one of the dominant themes in this name. In developing the theme of motherhood, she applies the same quality of honesty to her role of a mother as she does in her role of prostitute; in fact, the two tend to interconnect in their elements of pain, struggle, imperfection and loss. The end of this volume achieves the better understatement of a deeply felt truth:

The life of the underworld was truly a rat race, and most of its inhabitants survived like rodents in the sewers and gutters of the world. I had walked the precipice and seen it all, and at the critical moment one man's generosity pushed me away from Edge. (72)

### **Recreation of Life**

In the end Angelou acknowledges defeat and recreates the alienation and fragmentation that characterised her life. She does so not because she wishes to reinforce a sense of defeat or victimization but to ensure that we all learn to recognize what constitutes vulnerability in

order that we can avoid the consequences. This recognition forces one to acknowledge the sources of one's pain and to reconcile oneself to bearing, in some degree, responsible for the pain. Thus *Gather Together in My Name* presents itself as the necessary purgation through which the initiate must pass in order to recapture and to redefine the social self to function in a relatively healthy manner in white America.

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