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Engaging Autobiography as an Expression of Self
Maya Angelou's Autobiographies and Her Black Self

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Maya Angelou

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Caste and Race Deprivations and Prejudices

Generally speaking, mainstream Indian political leadership and political thought have always rejected equations between the deprivations caste entails in India and race enforces and imposes on the African American community in the United States. Caste is from within and race regulations are from without, imposed on a group of people because of skin color, etc., according to this general reasoning.

Resurgent Dalit and Rationalist leadership, however, thinks and claims otherwise. If skin color is not important, why should the word *varna*, a name given to caste, should connote “color” as one of its basic meanings? One could claim that the literal meaning of this term is, indeed, color. By

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birth caste is assigned, and by birth African Americans are assigned a label that is in contrast to the White race. If economic reasons were responsible for the segregation and exploitation of the Black people, landless labor certainly is an important factor in assigning caste professions and segregations of large groups of people in the Indian system. While claims are made that there are four categories of groups of castes, why should there be a Fifth Category of *Panchama*?

There are a few distinct Indian features: each caste is enabled, for whatever reason, to feel proud of their own caste even as the members of a so-called low caste certainly face disadvantages in encounters with the members of other castes. Folk religion probably links all castes, but the ritual religion separates the castes.

This certainly is an interesting area to research further. But the study and understanding of the ethos of suppressed and oppressed people around the world will enable us also to look afresh into our own social systems prevalent in India. In this context I'd like to report on how a woman creative writer, Maya Angelou, from the African American community in the United States, narrates, through her autobiographical essays, the struggles of people from the oppressed communities. Note that Maya Angelou is doubly disadvantaged: race and gender.

Creating Personal Space to Transcend Racial Prejudices and Stereotypes

“Maya is her books”, complimented Robert Loomis – the long time editor of Maya Angelou. She herself has observed,

I am a writer. Every writer is his or her books. Just as every singer is the song, while you're doing it. The dancer is the dance... (*Conversations With Maya Angelou*, i).

The Focus of This Paper

In the light of the above statement, the focus of this paper is to explore how a Black woman creates the personal space necessary to conquer and transcend prevalent stereotypes of gender and race that limit expectations and circumscribe future possibilities; how sex-role enculturation affects Maya Angelou's personal and artistic growth in a world that oppresses both the doubly marginalized artist and the autonomous female creator and how Maya Angelou has exploited the genre Autobiography to give vent to her feelings as a Black woman writer.

Autobiography as a Tool

Although Black writers have used autobiography for the Black cause since the days of slavery, few use the genre today. Maya Angelou who has made her life, her message employs only the tools of fiction but not its “make-believe” form to re-mould these perceptions. In Maya Angelou's writings there is little effort to conceal the pain but a great deal to reveal how she incorporates the negative and positive aspects of herself that enable her to meet the challenges of

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the world in which she must strive to live. Since art became an assertive statement for evolving the self of Angelou her major thrust is not to impart abstract or concrete knowledge, but to provoke human thought and announce eternal truths intended to elevate the consciousness of the readers.

Angelou's Female Sensibility

History of Black American literature in its oral and written context relates to Black women from the beginning. The works of Black women writers form an important part of every branch of Black American literature. From the slave narratives to the more highly crafted and sophisticated forms of the twentieth century, Black women have told their own stories in a unique way.

True to this tradition, Angelou's female sensibility becomes the underpinning of her books. She is a mother, wife, daughter, sister – but she lets none of these roles substitute for individual consciousness and imaginative exploration. Her womanly roles are the means to new understanding of the world.

We Want a Black Poem

Through her works Maya Angelou depicts the contours of the Black American autobiography that leads on to the creation of the New World, which Amiri Baraka demands in one of his poems, "The Black Art",

We want a Black poem. And a
Black World.

(*Norton Anthology*, 1997)

Black Womanhood and Wider Issues

In her series of autobiography, Maya presents the real condition of Black womanhood and their quest for love and to be understood. However, Maya's works are not limited to the Black-White issue. In her own words,

I am talking about all people – that's what I know, but I'm always talking about the human condition. So, if it's possible for me, Maya Angelou, me, myself to feel thirst, then I know it's possible for you to feel thirst. And if my tongue dries up with thirst, then I know how your tongue must feel when there's no liquid.... I accept that we human beings are more alike than unlike and it is that *similarity* that I talk about all the time. Yes, not just surviving... but thriving with passion and compassion, and humor and style, and excitement and glory, and generosity and kindness (*Conversations*, viii).

Maya Angelou doesn't confine herself to portray the Black people but seeks also to change the way people think about life. The burden of her work is to demonstrate the manner in which the Black female is violated, by all the forces of White America, in her tender years and to demonstrate the unnecessary insult of Southern girlhood in her movement to adolescence.

Alienated and Fragmented Lives

The richly textured ethical life of the Black people of the rural South and the dignity with which they live their lives are all but broken as a reader enters the alienated and fragmented lives which the urban world of America engenders as one finds in the second volume, *Gather Together in My Name*.

The Black people have known nothing but trouble all through their life. Though the grievances are multiple with the burden of being Black they can still smile. The progress that the Black has made up from slavery to their present status is one of the most remarkable advancements in the history of mankind. In the process they have learned to turn their liabilities into assets, to have faith in his ability to overcome all the obstacles between himself and full equality in a hostile land. And yet it is a long road, a long journey with the end not nearly in sight!

Hope is the Dominant Theme

Though sorrow and fear are prominent, hope is the dominant theme in the life of the Blacks. The earliest autobiographers encouraged other Blacks to follow the philosophy of social accommodation, often convincing themselves that it was the only hope of salvation for the Black masses. "Through the centuries of despair and dislocation", says Angelou "we had been creative because we faced down death by daring to hope" (*Traveling Shoes* 207).

Autobiography – A Native Genre

Since Angelou resolved to celebrate the Black life, all she needed was a right mode, a native genre for her celebration. This was readily available for her in the already popular Black autobiography. The Individual is the essential base from which an autobiographer builds relationships with the community and the family. The interplay between the individual and the group is highly obvious in Angelou's autobiographies. There are many situations to discover the individual self of Angelou. Maya lives in "perfect personal silence" for nearly five years until Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a Black intellectual and aristocrat in Stamps, Arkansas, throws Maya her "first life line", by accepting her as an individual, not in relation to another person. Mrs. Flowers' acceptance and encouragement allows the little Maya to experience the reality and power of her own worth.

When Angelou accompanies Mrs. Flowers to her house carrying her goods from the general store, she gave Angelou cookies and,

As I ate she began the first of what we later called “my lessons in living”. She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations (*Caged Bird* 87).

Family in Black Community

Dominant in Angelou’s autobiography is her relationship with the family and the Black community. To an extent, Angelou comes in full circle with these themes in all the volumes of her autobiography. Both community and family get merged into the life of the individual. In *Stamps, Arkansas*, the community nurtures its members and is a force in the lives of the Black people, despite the poverty of the community.

There are numerous examples to illustrate the communal character of life in *Stamps*. In her earliest work, she remembers her past: the cotton pickers who came into her grandmother’s store in the morning to buy sardines and cheese, the men and women who helped Momma to prepare the pork for sausage and who entered into the spirit of the revival and Sunday church services with joyful thanks and praise.

During the Great Depression when no one has money, Angelou’s grandmother Annie Henderson employs the barter system to help her neighbours and to save her store. Grandmother Henderson, Uncle Willie, her brother Bailey, and the community at large are the center of Angelou’s childhood and the shared life of that Black community is an important part of that childhood memory.

In Search of Security and Love

Angelou’s development of the theme of family begins in a preoccupation with the traditional nuclear family with caring husband, loving wife and dependent children. Angelou in search of a permanent love through marriage and family enters into wedlock with Louis Tolbrook. Because of her strong desire, she agrees to become the older Louis Tolbrook’s “Bobby Sock Baby” and a prostitute as well, in hopes of attaining a life of care and romance. Maya even fantasizes about becoming the wife of her generous drug-addict friend Troubadour Martin and uses heroin to prove her loyalty to him in order to gain a permanent relationship and security.

Angelou marries Tosh Angelos whom she met at her working spot, the record shop. Although Tosh Angelos proves to be a good husband and father, Angelou prefers to marry Thomas Allen, a bail bondsman, simply because he represented security. Later she drops him too when she meets Vusumzi Make, South African freedom fighter. She tries to be the proper wife of the respected South African freedom fighter, but at the same time she realizes that she cannot be the subservient woman her husband wants her to be.

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In her second, third and fourth volume of autobiographies, Angelou discusses at length her folly at feeling that what she needs to make her life and her son's life complete is a man despite her success and independence. Throughout her autobiographies one can witness the way in which Angelou acts and proves to be a good parent for her son and tries to provide him with the security that she has craved for since her childhood days.

Development of Self and Fulfillment in Community

Like the slave narrators who sought escape from bondage into a community that encouraged the development of self and fulfillment, the twentieth century autobiographers are also involved in a quest that will encourage the development of an authentic self. The quest for recognition of one's individual identity is a perennial theme in Black autobiography. Black autobiographers are individuals who have fought for and achieved their identity despite the efforts of others to deny them the personal worth.

Beauty and Physical Appearance – Identity Crisis

The identity crisis in the early works of Angelou is centered around her appearance which she feels is plain and ugly. She is trapped by her worries over the shape of her legs, the size of the breasts, the texture of the hair, the proportions of shoulders, waist and hips. She yearns to have long, blonde hair and blue eyes. Maya Angelou's maternal uncle confirms her,

He told me often, "Ritie don't worry 'cause you ain't pretty. Plenty pretty women I seen digging ditches or worse. You smart. I swear to God, I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind." (*Caged Bird* 66).

In the later works, the identity crisis is mainly around her conception of a woman, a Black woman and a Black woman writer in the hostile turf. It is her mother Vivian who infused the courage and stubbornness and to take pride in being a Black woman, "If you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking" (*Caged Bird* 246). It is this assurance of her mother and the encouragement of her maternal uncle Tommy helped Angelou to shake off the shackles that enmeshed her mind and spirit.

Oppression of Individuality and Individuals

While Angelou constantly demonstrates the unnecessary insult of Southern Black girlhood in her passage from childhood to adolescence, she also skillfully recreates those psychic, intellectual and emotional patterns that identify her individual consciousness and experience, which are highly exemplified in the graduation scene.

It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to changes brought against

A study of Angelou's autobiography is significant not only because the autobiography offers insights into personal and group experience in America, but also because it creates a unique place within Black autobiographical tradition. Her uniqueness is in her adopting a special stance in relation to the self, the community and the world. Angelou's concern for family and community, as well as for work and her conceptions of herself as a human being, especially as a Black woman and a representative of Black community are echoed throughout her autobiographies. The ways in which she faces these concerns provide an insight into the range of survival strategies available to women in America and reveals her deep insights into Black traditions and culture.

To Conclude

The content of this paper can be summarized as follows: Maya Angelou's significance as an autobiographer rests upon her exceptional ability to narrate her life story as a human being and as a Black American woman living in the twentieth century. Following the footpaths of her ancestors and the Black autobiographical tradition, Angelou has functioned as an articulator of the nature and validity of the collective Black heritage. She has interpreted the particulars of a culture for a wide audience both of Black and White Americans.

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Abbreviations used

Caged Bird – I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

Gather Together – Gather Together in My Name.

Traveling Shoes – All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes.

NA – Norton Anthology of Afro- American Literature.

Conversations - Conversations With Maya Angelou.

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