

## Maya Angelou Singing Black Womanhood

**Shanthi Nehemiah, M.A., M.Phil.**

Guest Lecturer

Govt. Arts and Science College

Hosur – 635110

[shanthi\\_nehemiah@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:shanthi_nehemiah@yahoo.co.uk)

Mobile No. 9488554272

=====  
*My mother, religious Negro  
Proud of having waded through a storm  
Is very obviously  
A sturdy black bridge that  
I crossed over on (IJAS 85)*

The place of black women in white America, the trials and tribulations these women encounter in the face of tyranny and male chauvinism, the cherished and warm feeling of motherhood at the heart of every black woman are discussed in this paper. This paper also focuses the genuine search of a black woman for her individuality and celebration of self- discovery.

The relationship between man and woman has always been a power struggle in which women are sometimes idolized, at other times patronized, but always oppressed and exploited. Sexually women are promoted as objects of sexual pleasure while men are sex seekers. When society gives so little power to women and asks so little of women in terms of role-model, it is the task of every woman to listen to her own inner voice to find her identity in this damaging and changing world. If this is the case and demand with women in general, the position of black women is even worse. Being black and women they are doubly burdened. They experience the special paradox of black womanhood: to be black and to be a woman, to be a double outsider, to be twice oppressed, to be more than invisible.

Frequently abandoned by her man, almost always without resources, often illiterate and uneducated, still she has been the glue to keep the family unit together, painstakingly attempting to give her children an education so they might lead a better life.

The internal self, mental agony and tenacity with which the black woman resists the ill treatment can be vividly visualized from Langston Hughes's poem "*The Negro Mother*"

...  
*I am the child they stole from the sand  
Three hundred years ago in Africa's land.*

*I am the black girl who crossed the dark sea  
Carrying in my body the seed of the Free  
I am the woman who worked in the field  
Bringing the cotton and the corn to yield.  
I am the one who labored as a slave.  
Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave –  
Children sold away from me, husband sold, too.  
No safety, no love, no respect was I due.  
A prey to white passion, a slave to white lust  
Nothing was too low for me then, in the dust.*

*(The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations, 1971)*

Slowly black women began to realize their potentiality and worth being a woman. One of the positive images is that originates from the slave narratives is that of black woman full of sass and quick-witted, using her intelligence to outwit her white master and attempting to gain freedom for herself and her children.

It was the long-term silence of the oppressed and the continual devaluation of black womanhood that gave way to the emergence of new black woman. The concept of new woman was akin to Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (NA, 961 – 70). Locke in his essay urges black Americans not to let anyone harass or patronize or treat them as a social burden. It is the ignorance of their own good qualities as a people that caused numerous problems.

These new women began shattering time-honoured stereotypes of themselves as compliant, silent partners of men. The goal of the new woman was to eliminate sexist oppression imposed by the patriarchal society and thus put an end to discrimination against women in the job, at home and in all areas of Black women's lives. Equal opportunity was their objective and sexism was their enemy. The new woman buried her own innocence and pulled herself up from the burial of her innocence and emerged as a decided new woman. She challenged all kinds of exploitations and the male authority in a male oriented society.

The new renaissance ushered by the civil rights movement in the 1960s, not only helped to celebrate black womanhood in the field of literature but also to assert themselves through their writings. It attempted to set right the misrepresentation of black women as beasts of burden in a white patriarchal society and to create an image of resilient black women. This gradual transformation of the black woman gave her an inkling of her true identity and gave meaning to her life. One of the motivations that initiated the new women was the declaration of Langston Hughes, which he made in *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* (1926):

*We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame... We build our temples for tomorrow... and we stand on the top of the mountain free within ourselves (NA 1271).*

This intellectual recognition reached its climax during the twentieth century with the emergence of black women writers. These writers recognized that self expression of the black women writers was important, because it reflected the expansion of American literary sensibility and offered the possibility for studying black women's lives in depth. The black women writers who were keen on forging the concept of the new woman were bent upon revolutionizing the role of women in the male dominated society. They were antagonistic to the stereotypes of women portrayed in the writings of male writers.

During 1970s, Maya Angelou rose to the occasion as a new woman singing in praise of womanhood, motherhood and unravelled the mystery of woman. "*Phenomenal Woman*", one of Angelou's poems, swells with the mystery of woman, asserting the greatness of being a woman. As a black woman loving the world, Angelou also knew its cruelty. She had known discrimination and extreme poverty, but also hope and joy, achievement and celebration. She has written of the black American experience, which she knew intimately.

"... *there were too many old females and not nearly enough women,*" Vivian Baxter, Angelou's mother reminds her of this difference by the end of Maya Angelou's fourth volume, *The Heart of a Woman*, Maya Angelou too has been striving for this womanhood in her continuing autobiography beginning from her first volume, *Caged Bird* to her latest volume *Journey*.

Maya Angelou has carved a niche for herself in the realm of literature with her ability to identify the human dimensions of who she is and how she got that way. Since she is a woman who has gone through the vicissitudes of life, she is able to write about it, without letting them affect her life. Taking a kind of initiative that startles even herself, she boldly invites an attractive young man to "*have sexual intercourse*" with her. When he eagerly complies, she found herself both reassured and pregnant. Angelou has proved her womanhood to herself and to the world. The feminist overtone of calling marriage a "social prostitution" is echoed when she admits that

*there was nothing wrong with sex. I had no need for shame. Society dictated that sex was only licensed by marriage documents. Well, I didn't agree with that. Society is a conglomerate of human beings, and that's just what I was. A human being (Gather Together 142).*

On graduation from high school, she simultaneously becomes a mother and an adult member of black society. She observes that,

*I had had help in the child's conception, but no one could deny that I had had an immaculate pregnancy (Caged Bird 245).*

The final tableau of Angelou and her son offered a revolutionary paradigm of the black anti Madonna. A proud Maya emerged from the cocoon, to which she had crept once. She gave birth not only to a child but also to a new, revitalized sense of her own competence. She was a self-empowered black woman triumphing over the vicissitudes imposed by patriarchal society.

In *Gather Together in My Name*, one can witness Maya Angelou's mental turmoil, moving in and out, forward and backward, struggling to cope with a hostile environment, stumbling over various jobs, yearning to earn more to keep herself and her son comfortable. She went to the extent of running a whorehouse with two lesbians, merely for survival. She turned tricks just for the love she had for a bankrupt Louis Tolbrook. By the realization of what the life of a junkie could be, exposed to her by her short-lived lover, Traubadour Martin, she decided to make her life:

*The next day I took the clothes, my bags and Guy back to Mother's. 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 (Gather Together 214).*

It is a different kind of innocence, an innocence gained through experience by a black woman. At the end of this second volume she determines to make her own life as a young single parent.

*I had to trust life, since I was young enough to believe that life loved the person who dared to live it (Heart, 4).*

In her daring to live, she moves to various parts of the United States and meets South African freedom fighter Vusumzi Make, whom she marries. It is the same trust in life which makes her to leave him. When she is unable to reside in the cage of male chauvinism of Vusumzi Make, Maya Angelou breaks the wedlock and steps out for good. At the end of this volume she is beginning her journey once again with faith and optimism, with the realization of a new "myself" of a woman who is no longer primarily defined as granddaughter or daughter or mother but a woman who is free to choose for herself.

Sidonie Smith in *Where I'm Bound* has remarked:

*Maya Angelou's autobiography comes to the sense of an ending: the black American girl child (Maya Angelou) has succeeded in freeing herself from the natural and social bars imprisoning her in the cage of her own diminished self-image by assuming control of her life and fully accepting her black womanhood (IJAS 22).*

Though this comment is made on *Caged Bird*, it could very well apply to any one of Maya Angelou's autobiographies. Angelou as a child searched for inward remedy to withstand rejection, disappointment and even onslaught from an adult world, but young Angelou had few refuges, among them are her brother Bailey and her world of books. In the end, self-education through literature gave her the additional fortitude and intellectual acumen to be a Baxter-Henderson (a combination of

Maya's maternal and paternal grandmothers) woman of her own generation. Maya is not and cannot be caged any more. She is a woman, a renewed woman. She fulfilled the call of Mari Evans in her titular poem of the volume, *I Am a Black Woman*.

*I am a black woman  
tall as a cypress  
strong  
beyond all definitions still  
defying place  
and time  
and circumstance  
assailed  
impervious  
indestructible*  
*Look  
on me and be  
renewed.* (NA, 1808)

Maya Angelou's renewed life as a black woman serves as an answer to the concluding lines of above quoted poem.

The content of this paper can be summarised as follows: Maya Angelou's works provide the framework for a discussion of woman's perception of her situation, her appraisal of the options available to her and the extent to which she views the possibilities for that success.

Her writings bear witness to the fact that the positive aspects of life are empowering, because they enable the individual to surmount the experiences of hardship or unhappiness or tantrums of life. Though suffocated by the odour of racial discrimination, she remains a well spring of strength and integrity.

*We have lived a painful history,  
We know the shameful past,  
But I keep on marching forward,  
"Equality", 15-17.*

More than a mere survivor, she has defeated the demons of her past and her personal insecurities to produce a body of work that is both intensely personal and embracingly universal.

*I don't like reminiscing  
Nostalgia is not my forte  
I don't spill tears  
On yesterday's years  
But honesty makes me say.  
You were a precious pearl.*

*“Just for a time”, 11-16.*

---

### **Abbreviations**

Caged Bird – I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.  
Gather Together – Gather Together in My Name.  
Heart –The Heart of a Woman.  
Journey - Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now.  
Singin' and Swingin'- Singin' and Swingin'and Gettin'Merry Like Christmas.  
Traveling Shoes – All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes.  
I J A S – Indian Journal of American Studies.  
NA – Norton Anthology of Afro- American Literature.  
Conversations - Conversations With Maya Angelou.

---

### **REFERENCES**

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.  
Gather Together in My Name.  
The Heart of a Woman.  
Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now.  
Singin' and Swingin'and Gettin'Merry Like Christmas.  
All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes.  
Indian Journal of American Studies.  
Norton Anthology of Afro- American Literature.  
Conversations with Maya Angelou.

---