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## **Confronting Oppression: A Study of the Struggle against Racial Discrimination in Maya Angelou's *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou***

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### **Abstract:**

The autobiographical tradition of Blacks is generally taken as a tradition which deviates from the mainstream white autobiography. These autobiographies are devoted to describe the struggle and revolt against white oppression. Black women's autobiographies form a major fraction of this literature. They are situated in the discriminatory space of race, gender and class. The uniqueness of this literature lies in the fact that it focuses on uncovering the lived experiences of the subjugated masses, mainly Black women. Maya Angelou has put in a lot for the advancement of African-American writing by contributing to the genre of African-American autobiography. Her autobiographies bring to the fore the feminine experience and her consequent escape to freedom. The structure of racism is very rigid and so deeply rooted in the conscious of the Americans that it cannot be dismantled forever, as a radical African -American intellectual Maya Angelou has marked a niche in the history of resistance literature by exposing, questioning and condemning its irrational practices. Not only this she succeeded in reaching out to her community, in mobilizing them and inspiring them to say no to exploitation and stand for their rights. She starts by portraying women as the marginalized beings relegated to the borders of the social existence gradually leading to their self-assertion. The present paper is a modest endeavor to explore experiences of marginalization of the Blacks with special reference to *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*; to study the nature of resistance in nature of African-American literature, to examine mixed oppressions of African-American women and to discuss the nature of the strategies devised by them in order to escape from and fight against the subjugation.

**Keywords: oppression- autobiography-resistance-race- identity.**

American Women writers began to create literary pieces from 1960s. They primarily resolved to depict the lives of Blacks by using literature as a mean of recording and sharing their experiences. They also tried for define their personal selves and to evaluate their own role in accepting the oppression and to critically examine their protest campaign against the negative and distorted images of Black females. By focusing on re-picturing the false images these writers led to change the portrayal of Black women who were earlier portrayed as meek and docile

creatures to their depiction as the assertive individuals who have gained their strength through self-realization hence striving to free them from the stereotypical representation.

Since generations men of almost all cultures, races and societies have played a dominant role in the social arena, while women are left to perform household labour such as cooking food and caring for children. This subordination of women has been translated in the works of fiction also. In most of the literary works, women are presented as submissive and indulgent in the non-creative errands. For centuries, they have been under-represented in the works of literature largely because these works were produced by the male authors who played a powerful role in the stereotyping of men and women. Such texts reflected the deep rooted gender biases and led to the strengthening of existing misconceptions about the sexes. Women in literature written by men are presented as 'Other', as objects of interest who only detract the male protagonist from his goals. Such literature if seen from the outlook of a female is completely foreign, for the reason that it disallows her crucial selfhood. Such literature fails to represent the depth of a women's experience'. On the other hand autobiographical texts written by African-American women depict the fundamental reality that women are selves, not others.

Although Angelou started her literary career as a poet, she is recognized for her five autobiographical works, which depict chronological periods of her life. Her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) is primarily about Marguerite Johnson and her brother Bailey's growing up in Arkansas with their grandmother. It chronicles Angelou's life up to age sixteen and provides a deep insight of a child's view of the baffling world of adults. Though her grandmother tried to fill up pride and poise in her, her self-image was crushed when she was raped at the age of eight by her mother's boyfriend. Angelou was so distraught by the harassment that she refused to speak for about five years. *I Know Why the Caged Bird sings* wraps up with Angelou's recapturing her self-pride and her acceptance of newborn son, Guy. This work also provides a deeper look into the socio-political upheavals of the 1930s.

Her next autobiographical work, *Gather Together in My Name*, (1974) envelops the phase after the birth of her son Guy and portrays her daring efforts to care for him as a single parent. Her third volume, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas* (1976) illustrates Angelou's beginning of a career in dance and closes with her return from the international tour of *Porgy and Bess*. Her fourth autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), portrays her gradual shift to maturity and her fitting in the world of creativity and success. Her fifth autobiographical work, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), recalls her stay in Ghana which lasted for four years, and its leading theme is of which is motherhood.

All through her life Angelou kept facing racial discrimination in one form or the other. In the southern part of America, where she lived during her childhood, Blacks encountered principally three kinds of oppressions: racism, sexism and classism. Arkansas was a racist area divided by the lines of race as well as gender, between whites and blacks and between males and

females. Angelou's encounter with racism started with passive resistance against ill-treatment of whites which further goes on to develop into outright disapproval of the racial acts. In her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Angelou uses image of a bird striving to break out of its cage, as portrayed in Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem. As she further reveals in her book, the caged bird sings of liberty which is restricted by the bars of race, gender and class. Through her involvement with the Black community of Stamps, Angelou depicts the cruel picture of the segregated south with a realistic portrayal of the racist characters and the harshness of the attitudes of Southern whites for African-Americans, her gradually developing understanding of the ways existing in a racist social order. Her autobiographies teach how to resist oppression. These texts depict Angelou, as the leading lady, whose reaction to the racist atmosphere range from vulnerable fury to subtle resistance.

Maya's parents got divorced when she was just three years old, and they decided to send Maya and Bailey to stay with their paternal grandmother. This migration played a crucial role in diminishing Maya's sense of worth. She and her brother Bailey felt that they were responsible for their own plight; they must have done something wrong that is why their parents left them. They passed through life frantically seeking a home, seeking a place where they can shelter themselves away from the seclusion from isolation, of loneliness. When they travelled to the house of their grandmother they actually travelled away from the abode of their parents. This rejection faced by these children in the early childhood lead to their internalization of their inferiority and rejection of the self. This sense of powerlessness and insignificance is highlighted in the starting pages of her first autobiography where she imagines waking up as an attractive white girl with blue eyes and blond hair. This incident is the reflection of the state of mind of a Black child who feels devalued because of the colour of her skin. Maya was black girl who identified herself as the "other" in a white world.

Angelou tells that her grandmother's method of tackling racism served as her first lesson for actively resisting and fighting racism. Once some white girls came to the store which Maya's grandmother used to run. These girls started, mocking at her mock by posing the physical appearance of an ape signifying that Momma looked like big an ape. They continued the mockery for quite some time. Momma was a well respected religious lady the only Black in the neighborhood who owned a store and lent money to the needy without considering any barrier of race during the time of the Great Depression. Maya was surprised at the immorality of those girls at disrespecting such a generous and dignified woman. Maya felt that the only thing those girls could see was the color of her skin.

I realized that she was aping my grandmother. Another said, "Naw, Helen, you ain't standing like her. This here's it." Then she lifted her chest, folded her arms and mocked that strange carriage that was Annie Henderson. Another laughed, "Naw, you can't do it. Your mouth ain't poached out enough. It's like this" (p. 29). Maya was observing the whole chain of events.

She was very upset over their behavior; she wished she could stone them. The incident led Maya to respond with vulnerable rage and embarrassment, after watching her grandmother's response to those girls, Maya discovered that there can be a healthier and more helpful way to react. When the racist girls aped her Momma's posture, Maya cried, she thought of taking her uncle's rifle and killing them. She was surprised at the way her grandmother reacted to that humiliation. When they were leaving and Momma graciously said good-bye to them, Maya's rage peaks:

She stopped singing and said, "Bye, Miz Helen, 'bye, Miz Ruth, 'bye, Miz Eloise." I burst. A firecracker July-the-Fourth burst. How could Momma call them Miz? They mean nasty things. Why couldn't she have come inside the sweet, cool store when we saw them breasting the hill? What did she prove? And then if they were dirty, mean and impudent, why did Momma have to call them Miz? (p.31-32) Later on Maya realized that her grandmother has achieved something, she had won a battle. Maya found out that there is a more useful tactic for responding to racism and separation than anger and resentment, a policy of quiet resistance. Her response to those girls was not that of an open confrontation, but through subtle resistance she had registered her disapproval without posing any threat to her of their life, liberty or assets. This incident can also be view from the standpoint of the theory of emotional labour as given by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild. She provides the first definition of emotional labor, which is "a form of emotion regulation that creates a publicly visible facial and bodily display within the workplace." Emotional labour is basically the effort that we put in order to hide our actual feelings. We may feel very lonely amidst the crowd, or we may feel relaxed and relieved at a funeral but still we have to keep a check on our emotions, we have to regulate our emotions so that they fall in line with the situation that we are in. Emotional labour has been recognized by many businesses as an important tool which can provide them competitive advantage. Like the makeup and unreal smiles of the flight attendants are the faces of the blacks who, in their effort to become a part of the mainstream have landed up in the company of the whites. At all the social gatherings, meetings or even parties, they have to put on a face to be shown only to the whites they have to show that they are happy being a part the white system, happy enjoying the company of the whites no matter how uncomfortable, alienated or humiliated they feel. And like the passengers of the airlines, the whites are able to clearly detect the fact that Blacks are actually not feeling just pretending the joy. But still, they let the things be as they are. Truly happy and satisfied or not, as long as their behavior is not bothering them, they are happy.

Maya was a self-respecting child .She always wanted to live with dignity. At the age of ten, she started working as a maid for a white employer, Viola Cullinan. Mrs. Cullinan chose to give her a name; she found the name Marguerite is too long and started calling her Mary. Angelou's did not like this naming for two reasons firstly, she found the act disrespectful as she thought nobody should have the right to change her identity, and secondly the act reminded her the times of slavery when blacks were named on the will of their masters. It was quite ironic that the society which denied the Blacks of their dignity, which pushed them into the depths of subservience, claimed the right to shape their identities. Remer also pinpoints; "white seeks any outlet to assuage their blood stained consciences, contorting languages and names themselves in

a futile attempt to legitimize slavery or power and conceives themselves that [white power] is justified” (1). By the naming the Blacks as per their wishes; whites manifested their authority over the Blacks and at the same time their right to belittle and degrade them. Maya was not able to endure this disgrace and decided to quit the job. She along with her brother Bailey decided to resolve the issue. Bailey suggested that she should break one of Mrs. Cullinan’s favorite serving dishes so that she dispels her from her services. This incident can be seen as an act of sabotage against the people who tried to define the Blacks.

One of the greatest instances of the racial discrimination was when Stamps’ white and only dentist - to whom Maya's grandmother had lent money without any interest refused to treat Maya when she suffered from severe toothache, telling her grandmother, “Annie?” “Yes, sir, Dentist Lincoln.” He was choosing words the way people hunt for shells. “Annie, you know I don’t treat nigra, colored people.” “I know, Dentist Lincoln. But this here is just my little grandbaby, and she ain’t gone be no trouble to you ...” “Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don’t treat colored people... My policy ...” He let go of the door and stepped nearer Momma. The three of us were crowded on the small landing. “Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s.” He had never once looked at me. He turned his back and went through the door into the cool beyond (p. 183-184).

The dentist’s decision not to treat Maya seems worse as the dentist was the man who received so much money from Maya’s grandmother at the time of Great Depression. The severity of the pain of Maya’s and the liberality of Mrs. Henderson did not bother the haughty white dentist. A white doctor having a policy not to treat the black patients says a lot about the kind of racial segregation that existed during those times. This time Mrs. Henderson resistance was different from the earlier passive ones, in this case that she directly dealt with the dentist and commands him to disappear from the town as soon as possible:

*“I didn’t ask you to apologize in front of Marguerite, because I don’t want her to know my power, but I order you, now and herewith. Leave Stamps by sundown.” “Mrs. Henderson, I can’t get my equipment ...” He was shaking terribly now. “Now, that brings me to my second order. You will never again practice dentistry. Never! When you get settled in your next place, you will be a vegetarian caring for dogs with the mange, cats with the cholera and cows with the epizootic. Is that clear?” The saliva ran down his chin and his eyes filled with tears. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you for not killing me. Thank you, Mrs. Henderson” (p. 185).*

This is the only part of the novel which is presented in stream of consciousness technique; it depicts what went on in Maya’s mind at the time when she was waiting outside for her grandmother while her grandmother was dealing with the doctor. It is shown that Maya’s

grandmother threatened the white dentist straight away which is quite an unusual behavior because her grandmother was always portrayed as the one who resisted passively. The whole of this incident did not actually happen. It was all young Maya's fantasy, her yearning. Maya was waiting outside, she could not see what happened inside, and this was an illustration of how Maya wanted things to be. She wanted her Grandmother to confront the dentist face to face, to threaten him to death. This is the projection of the anger growing inside Maya. The actual event that happened was that Maya's grandmother collected an interest of the money she had given him before. The italicized passage revealed what Maya wishes her grandmother could do to the racist dentist. Maya did not notice any open argument between her Momma and the racist whites, and she knew that is her momma's philosophy was to resist passively. By illustrating her imagination Maya tried to highlight the fact that subtle resistance is not enough as a tactic to counter to racial oppression. Even though it is barely a dream, it is the first example in the her autobiographies where a Black person is openly dealing with a racist white, and it is the first suggestion that such a counter attack is possible.

An act of discouraging the Black students' regarding their future took place at the time of Maya's 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation where a white man was invited as a guest speaker. The white man named as Mr. Edward Donleavy from Texarkana gave a rather racist speech in the presence of the Black crowd during the commencement address of the graduation. The white man discouraged and annoyed the Black students and their parents together with school administrators by telling that Black students will be employed in manual labor related jobs, since they lack mental brightness so that they cannot become scientists. Maya's first reaction of embarrassment and anger was; "Then I wished that Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had killed all whitefolks in their beds" (p. 176). The anger doesn't confine to the young Maya, the whole community of African-Americans present in the hall shared her emotions; "...the proud graduating class of 1940 had dropped their heads" (p.175).

The whole of the community sang the song called 'Black National Anthem' after this incident. Singing this song was their attempt at reclaiming their dignity which the white man had just tried to snatch. In the same way as her grandmother had avoided the powhitetrash girls, the song avoided an outright face-to-face protest with the white oppressor but it did allow the Black community to feel its dignity and supremacy; "We were on top again. As always, again. We survived" (p. 179). The blacks, since they lacked power could not afford a violent protest, so they devised other means of subtle resistance like not paying heed to what racist say about them, not reacting over such humiliations, but the fact cannot be ignored that such embarrassments had a great impact on their psychological well being as it damaged their sense of personal dignity.

We think of race as a broad division of mankind and thinking in terms of race first of all refers to the physical features typical of the race or in other words the heritable and visible characteristics like the skin colour, shape of the skull, facial features like the shape of the nose, lips etc. Racism operates on two levels one; between the races and second within the race.

Whites may be proud of their skin colour and may hate the Blacks for being non-whites but all Blacks are not jet Black and their do exist mixed races. Due to migration and interbreeding, their hardly exists a thing as 'pure race'. It is almost impossible to find a European who is exclusively long headed, fair haired with blue eyes but they are fairer and blue eyed compared to the Afro-Americans. So, this means that the root of the racial prejudice lies in the recognition of the difference. One race is taller, fairer than the other. Same is the case with the skills and mental abilities, to generalize, Blacks learn the languages faster than the whites do and Whites do much better in Mathematics than the Blacks. But the point to be noted here is that such differences do not define a race to be superior or inferior. The division between superior and inferior depends upon the fact that which race possesses the socio-political power. Because with this power comes the authority to manipulate knowledge, the knowledge of history, to manipulate social media and to manipulate the laws. The easiest way which the whites could devise to put Blacks behind them was to discourage them from moving forward.

The racial hatred resulted in segregation and due to segregation the rift between the whites and blacks grew so wide that there were so many blacks who had never seen whites and vice versa. In the beginning of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Maya tells that "In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most of Black children didn't really, absolutely knew what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dreaded was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed. I remember never believing that Whites were really real." (p.24) and again "these others, the strange pale creatures that lived in their alien life weren't considered folks. They were whitefolks." (p.24) Due to the problem of segregation, Maya, like most people in Stamps, knew nothing about the whites. She was so alienated from them that she did not even regard them as human. She thought that they blacks and whites were poles apart. She perceived them as creatures with transparent skin and who are impulsive, difficult to comprehend and very strange. "I remember never believing that whites were really real ...I couldn't force myself to think of them as people...White folks couldn't be people" (Ibid., p. 25).

This alienation was the result of social segregation. The Blacks and Whites lived in separate neighborhoods. There were no common gatherings or other chances where they could know each other. That is why Maya's uncle Willie says once, "They don't really hate us. They don't know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared." (p.153) the Blacks were told stories of racial violence between the Blacks and the Whites so the Blacks were afraid of the whites. They could not imagine that they could be friends with the whites. When Maya was asked to trust a White man, she was herself unable to do that. "I said I did not trust no white man because all they wanted was to get a chance to kill a Black man legally and get his wife in the bed." (p.172) Later when Maya was looking for a babysitter for her son she was confronted with a babysitter who kept White babies also, at this juncture it was hard for her to believe that Blacks trusted their babies with a Black babysitter. Maya was always instructed to be careful with the

Whites and not to trust them ever. When she came back to Arkansas from California her grandmother strictly instructed her not to lose sight of the fact that whites are dangerous for Blacks.

Maya lived in a society where that racism and sexism were two horrible components of the social atmosphere which paved the way of the subjugation and marginalization of African-American women. She was well aware of the environment that surrounded her but she never lost hope, she always strived to find solutions. She felt that every lowly profession was meant for the Blacks and they could not aspire to become anything higher than that. "We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired was farcical and presumptuous." (p.140) Blacks as they were conscious about the fact that they were considered lowly beings and uncivilized. They tried their best to display best of their manners in front of the Whites. As Angelou says, "If one was dying, it had to be done in style if the dying took place in whitefolks' part of town." (p.145) The point to be noted here is that Blacks wanted to be recognized as equals they did not seek any special attention, this indirectly points to the fact that they were generally not treated well and that was the reason they required special attention. During her school days Maya liked those people who were indifferent to her race, rather than those treated her with pity and tried to be kind to her. "Where some of the other teachers went out of their way to be nice to me- to be a "liberal" with me-and others ignored me completely, Miss Kirwin never seemed to notice that I was Black and therefore different." (p.167) Maya and her brother Bailey were witnessing Racial lynching in Arkansas and to save the two children from such brutal sights their grandmother sent them to California where lynching were unheard of and where the black children could go places without any fear. When they came back from San Francisco, people could not believe that there existed a land where Blacks were treated as people. "...they all needed to believe that a land existed somewhere, even beyond the Northern Star, where Negroes were treated as people and whites were not the all-powerful ogres of their experience." (p.283)

The gap between the whites and Blacks was so wide that there was no chance of mingling. Even if one tried to mingle with or be friendly with the person of a different race his/ her intentions were suspected. When a White woman Lousie Cox, who was the owner of a Record Shop which Maya visited frequently; tried to be friendly with her and offered her to take a cassette with her, Maya doubted her intentions. Her behavior did not seem genuine to Maya. She thought, "It wasn't wise to reveal one's feeling to strangers. And nothing on earth was stranger to me than a friendly white woman." (p.393) Maya was of the view that a white woman would not like to seek friendship with her because white women already have a lot of friends and admirers, including both black and white men. A lonely person seeks friendship but when they are never lonely, why would they seek friendship. "She couldn't have been seeking friendship; after all she was white, and as far as I knew, white women were never lonely, except in books. White men adored them, Black men desired them and Black women worked for them. There was no ready explanation for her gesture of trust." (p.393)

When Maya was working with Porgy and Bess, she got a chance to visit Yugoslavia, where she realized that the people there had never seen the blacks. The people started peeping through the windows of the hotel just to catch a glimpse of the strange creatures that they found them to be. This estrangement was very humiliating to Maya. She and her colleagues felt like animals that were put to display at a zoo. Maya's colleague Martha said, "Miss Thing, they think we're monkeys or something...They think we're in a cage. I wouldn't be surprised if they threw peanuts at us." (p.548) and again when Angelou was invited for dinner at a house in Yugoslavia an old woman of the house, who had never met any Black in her life got frightened to see Maya. She reacted as if she has seen a ghost. But Maya understood her reaction and she reacted by telling that if she had not seen a White all her life her own reaction would have been the same. Although such reactions were the results of the alienation, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that how badly such incidents affected the emotional well being of the Blacks.

Such humiliating experiences made the Blacks to be watchful of the whites, not to trust them or hate them. Once when Maya's son got ill and she took him to the doctor for his checkup. Maya found that she was unable to express her worries to him. She could not connect to him enough to share her worries with him.

*"But what could I tell this man?...How would he perceive a mother who, in a desperate thrust of freedom, left her only child, who became sick during her absence?...A mother who, Upon her return, felt so guilty she could think of nothing more productive than killing herself and possible even the child?...No. I couldn't tell him about living inside a skin that was hated or feared by the majority of one's fellow citizens or about the sensation of getting on a bus on a lovely morning, feeling happy and suddenly seeing the passengers curl lips in distaste or avert their eyes in revulsion. No, I had nothing to say to the doctor. I stood up." (p.610)*

Maya tells an incident where due to a problem with her son she was asked to come to his school and talk to his teachers. As Maya talked to them she realized that they were not fair towards her son. She felt that they disliked the black students. They blamed her son Clyde without giving him any chance to explain himself; at this juncture Maya realized that it is stupid on her part to expect a fair trial from the whites as their racial biases will never allow them to be fair with the Blacks. "I don't know why I thought white teachers would be fair to a Negro Child." (p.638) Maya even discusses Malcolm attitude toward \s the whites. In his speech to the Blacks he tells them not to trust the Whites. "Any white American who says he's your friend is either weak...or he's an infiltrator...Either he'll be too scared to help you when you need help or he's getting close to you so he can find out your plans and deliver you back in the chains of his brothers." (p.759) United States for Afro-American is not United Nations but United White Folks. Again Maya tells, "*The Black* was a white foreigner's idea of a people he did not understand." (p.785)

Maya wanted to be proud of her identity; she did not want to be pitied upon. When a white woman offered friendship to her she felt she was being pitied over she thought, “A white woman? Feeling sorry for me? She wouldn’t dare. I would smash her nose deep into the unasked-for sympathy until her eyes dribbled tears and she learned that I was a queen, not to be approached by peasants like her, even on bended knees, and wailing.” (p.394) Maya did a lot of jobs to make a living but she made it sure not to work as a servant in the house of Whites. In face of the atrocities inflicted on them in the name of race, they felt that they were treated in the same ways as Jews were treated in past. “For hundreds of years, the Black American slaves had seen the parallels between their oppression and that of the Jews in Biblical Times....The Hebrew children in the fiery furnace elicited constant sympathy from the Black community because our American experience mirrored their ancient tribulation. With that familiarity, I figured Judaism was going to be a snap!” (p.408) The existence of other human beings was denied just because of the colour of their skin. Maya always felt the pain that the knowledge of the history of slavery brought to her. While in Ghana she decided to visit the Elmina Castle where the captured slaves used to be kept. “The captives has been imprisoned in dungeons beneath the massive buildings and friends of mine who had felt called upon to make the trek reported that they felt the thick stone walls still echoed with old cries. ...Pangs of self-pity and a sorrow for my unknown relatives suffused me. Tears made the highway waver, and were salty on my tongue.” (p.963)

When Maya became bar dancer the owner of the bar tried to use her as a symbol of his racial tolerance. He even told her that he cannot do anything if people made comments on her due to her race as her race is a reality which cannot be changed.”...if they say anything about your colour, I can’t help that. ‘Cause you *are* colored Right?”(p.439) She was just asked to sit in the bar so that the people could see her and be assured of the bar owner’s racial harmony. Like the caste system in India religion was used as a tool to justify the racial oppression and at the same time to stabilize people’s reaction against their own suppression. As a child it was Maya’s perception that God was white too. “Of course, I knew God was white too, but no one could have made me believe he was prejudiced.” (p.42) The religion was used to justify racial oppression. The ideologies of the dominant race play a major part in influencing the members of the subordinate race. This can be discussed in the context of Fanon’s analysis of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonized, due to the perpetual subordination and due to the colonizer’s justification that their plight resulted from their racial and cultural background, are made to accept and adopt the culture of the dominant race and somewhere condemn their own. The subordinated race, due to the changes in social consciousness and awareness or rather acknowledgement of its own cultural heritage redefines itself. Huey Newton one of the leaders of the Black Panthers Party says that black people who were not enlightened referred to the White man as ‘the man’, which implies that they did not consider themselves men. They themselves denied their identity of the basic human dignity. And that the Black panthers define the administrators and security agents as pig, that is to say less than men (p.83)

According to Angelou African American Women need to raise their voice against the oppression rooted in race and gender. They should protest against the masculine prejudices, white irrational hatred and the weaknesses of the Blacks. Through her autobiographies she has insisted on the need for women to respect themselves enough not to tolerate any kind of subjugation. Women according to her should struggle against the suppressing forces and should continue their quest for identity sovereignty and liberty. As an autobiographer and a womanist writer, Maya gathered her ability to bravely demonstrate the life of the black women during the civil rights movement. She was one of the first woman authors who chronicled her occurrence of the unwanted intercourse. She unveiled the fact that how *Rape*, is used as a special weapon, used by men to gain pleasure and at the same time to suppress women. Angelou has taken the project of unifying all black women to stand against all evil stereotypes and to protest against the repressions imposed by the whites and Black men on them.

One of the most brutal incidents which damaged Maya's self esteem was the incident of her sexual assault. In her anthology *Written by Herself*, Jill Ker Conway points to a dominant theme in black women's autobiography which also finds reflection in Angelou's autobiographies: "Because, from girlhood, these women faced the dual injustices of racial hostility and male exploitation, their life histories are told with no hint of romantic conventions. They describe, instead, a quest for physical and psychological survival" (3).

According to Kolchin, "Women are the victim of outright rape of the powerlessness that makes the resistance futile" (qtd. in Ali 1421). Parents affection was never present in Maya's life. She always craved for love. She was emotionally starved as a baby; she was denied the affection and care that she deserved from a father. In order to fill that emptiness Maya craved for affection and begins to see Mr. Freeman as a father she mistakes his sick intimacy for love. And when she is assaulted by the same man whom she thought, would never hurt her, who will in fact save her from any harm. Maya was perplexed she was stunned by the experience and by the chain of events that were to follow. Mr. Freeman then threatens to kill her brother Bailey if she mentioned the incident with anyone, this warning which frightens Maya into stillness.

Maya's the peace of mind, her sense of dignity, her childlike innocence all are damaged by this incident, and on top of that she belonged to a social class which already lived on the fringes. The point to be noted here is that the most disturbing incident of Angelou's young life in fact had nothing to do with racial oppression; the man responsible for rape was black, and the members of her own race, her own relative were the ones who imposed the eventual punishment of death on him. This incident exemplifies the double oppression of the black women, Maya was a victim of both the racist and sexist society, and she suffered at the hand of racism and at the hand of male-domination within her race.

Before Maya was assaulted by Mr. Freeman she saw the male members of her race as a strong support. Her brother Bailey's caring and supportive attitude towards her was crucial in generating a feeling of trust for Mr. Freeman. Maya decides not to speak a word after she realized that her rapist was killed by her relatives. She blamed herself for revealing his name. Maya's rape reveals the psychological fluctuation a Black woman undergoes, who is violated when she is growing from child to teen. Angelou shared her own experience in order to lay bare the complication involved in rape. She also wanted to avoid it from happening to anyone else, so that anyone who had been raped might not feel guilty.

Throughout the period of muteness in Maya's life the only thoughts that remained in her mind were of the way her words led to the death of Mr. Freeman. Maya has become afraid of uttering anything as this she thought could bring harm to anyone around her. It was during this time that her teacher Mrs Flowers came in her life to rescue her. She through her counseling and through her encouragement to read helped her to get out of the world of silence, seclusion, and loneliness. Maya got awakened to the powers of words. Mrs. Flowers represented the treasure of literature to Maya through which she was able to rediscover her voice as well as individuality. Now empowered with a voice, Maya could share her innermost feeling through writing speaking; she could enjoy the treasure of words through listening to songs, reading the books. "She returns to speaking with a sense of the power of language both to console her for her powerlessness and to give her a new power: this caged bird has learned to sing." (qtd. in Uysal 62).

Books come to rescue Maya at this point in her life. She did not want to speak to anyone; she wanted to be alone the books saved her from her loneliness. Through books she developed self-pride. Instead of perceiving herself as a poor, discarded unattractive girl, she started believing that she was an attractive princess who has just been mistaken for a maid. She became so rigorously involved in the fiction that sometimes she lost sight of the reality. Reading provided her with an identity an identity which though was unreal but one of which she could be proud of. (Ibid., p. 189-195).

Angelou portrayed the way the Black of the Black community of Stamps community remained strong and unified in face of the racial threats and the way they challenged the repressive structures of the society. Angelou depicts how she, built up her racial hatred as a black child in a world ruled by the whites. When Maya comes to live with her mother Vivian Baxter in San Francisco she realized how strong a woman can be. Her mother became a significant force in her life. She was a symbol of revolt against oppression. She lived her life her own way. She rewrote the traditions views about women she lived with men whom she did not even marry. When a man abused her, she along with her brothers hit him. While her grandmother taught her to live within her limits, her mother taught her, to break from boundaries that inhibit her from living her life fully. She did not hold on to the Christian principles of kindness and charity. She talked very

openly about her gambling and drinking. She was the kind of woman who valued her self-respect and independence more than anything else. It was the influence of her mother only that Maya gathers the courage and confidence to stand against oppression. Maya decision to become the first African American cable cars conductor was an example of the inspiration she got through the defiant character of her mother.

To conclude, we can say that Angelou has been the author who fought the discrimination and inequality against Black women. Her most significant triumph is raising the stature of the Black woman in literature. Through her autobiographies she has made her life her message. The message of the reconstruction of her 'self,' which gets shattered by the relegating forces of racist and masculine oppression. The extensive public appreciation and critical response to her autobiographical works have managed to bridge the gap between life and art, a step that is vital for upright existence of the Black women. Angelou's sincere depiction of the socio-political atmosphere of the times that shaped her life, lead to convey how all these institutions influenced her life and the lives of those who lived during the same time period. Her autobiographies this way manage to serve both her purposes: to depict her personal struggle with the oppressive forces and her survival and second, they serve as the texts representative of the larger struggle of African-American community, especially women against the multiple oppressions. By stating her experiences, by raising her thunderous voice against racism, sexism and classism in her autobiographies Angelou has strived to unveil the anguish of Black women of her times.

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