

## GENDER IDENTITY AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION PRESENTED IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF MAYA ANGELOU.

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### Abstract:

*African American literature has remained an inevitable part of American Literature. The first writing by blacks in America was autobiographical and became known as the slave narratives. Three themes developed in early African American writings related the issue of slavery: accommodation, protest, and escape. African American literature has remained an inevitable part of American Literature. The first writing by blacks in America was autobiographical and became known as the slave narratives. Three themes developed in early African American writings related the issue of slavery: accommodation, protest, and escape. African American literature has remained an inevitable part of American Literature. The first writing by blacks in America was autobiographical and became known as the slave narratives. Three themes developed in early African American writings related the issue of slavery: accommodation, protest, and escape.*

**Key Words:** Discrimination, racism, gender identity, autobiographies

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### Introduction:

The present study is a modest attempt at quest for an identity and racial discrimination presented in the autobiographies of Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou is one of the best known and celebrated African-American writers. She is widely acclaimed not only in America but also across the World. She has been accoladed by many national and international awards for her work. Her Life experiences are the cornerstone of her work. She began her career as a poet, later on becomes well known for her autobiographical work, that depicts her life story. The autobiographies reflect her life, which has based on identity. Through the work, she has portrayed different factors which are affected on the Black women.

The study tries to explore the Maya's life, also it explores how she suffered in her community. It highlighted her presentation of different issues are different from those of other writers. The study focused on the identity and racism in her autobiographies. Angelo has written the formation of her identity throughout her autobiographies. Her main goal was to write about the live of black women, later on it evolved her life story.

### Objectives of the Research:

The present work has some objective. They are stated as follows:

- To understand the life story of Maya Angelou.
- To study Maya Angelou as an African – American writer.
- To investigate the mixed oppression of African – American women.



- To examine the nature of the sacrifice paid by Black women in America.
- To focus slavery, identity, racism, violence etc. on which the Blacks are trapped.
- To study the African – American Literature.

### **Hypothesis**

Maya Angelou's life has been segregated, humiliated in the class dominated African – American society under racial discrimination, color discrimination and the patriarchy system.

### **Research Methodology**

The present research is concerned with the textual analysis of the autobiographies. Therefore, library and qualitative method are used for the present research.

#### **A) Primary Sources:**

The present research work is based on the autobiographies of Maya Angelou. The primary sources are used for this work are as follows:

1. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969)
2. Gather Together in My Name (1974)
3. Singin and Swingin and Gettin Merry Like Christmas (1976)
4. The Heart of a Woman (1981)
5. Children Need Travelling Shoes (1986)
6. A Song Flung Up to Heaven (2002)
7. Mom and Me and Mom (2013)

#### **B) Secondary Sources:**

The research has used Reference book, Research Papers, Articles, Journals, Magazines and e- resources after its authentication and validation.

Scope and limitations of the research:

The present research studies the autobiographies written by Maya Angelou. These autobiographies depict the harsh realities of the Maya Angelou's and the Black women life related to Human Rights.

### **Maya Angelou: A Black feminist:**

Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently. --- Maya Angelou

Famous for her series of seven autobiographical volumes, which focus on her childhood and **Maya Angelou** was a courageous renowned African-American author, poet, singer and dancer, and an inspirational **feminist**. This Civil Rights Activist Joanne M. Braxton has called Maya as "**America's Most Visible Black Female Autobiographer**". **Being a Black Woman in America in the early 1900s, was like being dead meat due to the brutal and excruciating racial discrimination against the Blacks**. Later, all rebellious black women became feminists. Maya Angelou was one of them. She has respect as a speaker of blacks and her works have been considered a defence of Black culture. But before she was a slave of whites, the respect and the honour has been achieved by her devotion towards the black upliftment. Blacks been like slaves in those days, but unlike every 'black slave', Angelou never gave up. She fought through literary work and art. Her works continue to inspire every black. She becomes adult experiences.



Angelou was a member of ‘**Harlem Writers Guild**’. Harlem is known as a major African-American residential, cultural and business centre that encourages the African-Americans to get educated and economically stable. The **Harlem Renaissance** was a cultural movement also known as the **New Negro Movement**. Maya Angelou is one of the strong women, has chosen, to fight against the dominancy to live peacefully. Maya Angelou has stated, “You will face many defeats in your life, but never let yourself be defeated”. She keeps herself strong and hopeful and never let her dreams. Even though her words were written decades ago, they still influence and inspires us. She stood up for every woman. Angelou attempted to invent new identity for black woman in terms of physical beauty that many white women regarded as one of the aspects of evaluating women's virtues. Angelou blended her influential voice in her poems correspondingly to sustain her powerful independent identity as a black woman.

Angelou keeps an influential voice in her works to sustain her powerful independent identity as a black woman. She is one of the most effective feminist writers who exhibited her consciousness and awareness toward the racial power of the American society (Lupton, 1998:72)

**She has raised different issues such as, racism, injustice and rape that resonate with black people from all walks of life.** Her purpose is to express her own vulnerable condition through a series of autobiography so that others would feel to express their own. She does not shy away from politics throughout her life, instead she keeps friendships with prominent activists such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Angelou has written about her experience. Angelou supports women to have the of rights to talk on matters of abortion. She has denied the traditions of their community and gives a birth in teenage and raised her son, Guy, against all the odds.

She speaks about how her own challenges helped her to grow stronger, at the same time it strengthens her abilities and finally she owed the honesty of the world. She speaks about ‘Womanism.’ It includes strength, commitment, sexual fulfilment and gender equality that she looks among black women. She has stated, “I speak to the black experience, “but I am always talking about the human condition — about what we can endure, dream, fail at and survive.”

### **Autobiographies Selected for the Present Study:**

Maya Angelou has used autobiography as a medium to define a quest of an individual that leads the general condition of all the blacks in America. She reveals the experiences that faced by the black Americans. She “seeks not only to portray but to change the way, the people think about life. She writes to inform to entertain and to elevate.” (Elliot 1989: viii). She calls herself an autobiographer rather she insisted that becoming a human being was better than this.

#### **1. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings:**

It is Angelou’s first autobiography published in 1969, it is a coming of age story of Maya Angelou. The book was nominated for a national book award in 1970. In 1931, Maya was about three years and her brother Bailey, sent to Stamps, Arkansas to live with their



grandmother, Momma Henderson, as their parents were divorce momma owns a general store with her disabled son, Willie.

Stamps is highly segregated and racialized. Maya feels isolated with a sense of injustice. They try to adjust the life of Stamps. Their Momma is the role model for them. Suddenly, their father came in Stamps and took them to live with their mother, Vivian Baxter. She works at parlor and does not like to spend time with Maya and Bailey. At the age of 8, Mr. Freeman, Vivian's friend, sexually abused Maya and rapes her. He threatens to children that he will kill them. As a result, Maya became silent and stops talking. Again, mother Vivian send the children to stamps

In Stamps, Maya recovers slowly and started talking. Mrs. Flowers gives her sympathy and shows respects towards her feelings. Maya begins her study and spends most of time in reading. Racial intolerance made them to leave the place again and left Stamps, again they came to live with their mother in San Francisco. Maya herself boosts herself-esteem and gives exposure to her experiences and brought changes into her thinking style. By growing with an age, she decides to get a job and becomes the first female streetcar operator. simultaneously, she continues her senior year of high school. Meanwhile she becomes pregnant and did not tell to anyone until her graduation. She gives birth to a son and enters into a passage of adulthood from adolescence.

## **2. Gather Together in My Name:**

Gather together in my name (1974) was the second autobiography of Maya Angelou. The autobiography covers the three years' experiences of Maya Angelou right after the first autobiography. Although the work continues the same themes such as, loneliness. the story begins with the appearance of birth of Mayas son, when she was about 16 years old. They live with their stepfather in San Francisco. At the same time, there is hope in the black community that racism will be decline as with the victory of world war. But that optimism soon disappears with the reality.

Angelou searches a number of jobs and relations in order to bring stability in life. Each new relationship makes her disappointed and takes advantage of her. Still, she is in search of prince, who will shower happiness in her life. By getting a job, Maya becomes a manager for two lesbian prostitutes, but she left the job, as there was the risk of arrest and comes to live with her grandmother. She started dancing as a professional dancer. Maya Angelou meets L. D. Tolbrook and fall in love, but soon she realized that he has been cheating her by tricking into prostitution. At the end of story, Maya feels rejected, hopefulness, exhausted and defenseless with the tragic life. She has recognized that, she would not be getting drug addicted and finds her defeat. It rises new hopes into her and decides to sake herself and her son's life, who is 3 years old now.

The autobiography explores the Maya's life as a black woman in the united states. She has connected her own story with the historical context of those time, by including the incidents and policies about racism. Through all autobiographies, Maya explores her poverty and her life as a single mother. She feels isolated and finds less opportunities to take care of her family. At the age of 19, she has experienced racism and its effects and tries to find a identity as a black



woman, a mother and a writer.

### **3. Singing and Swinging and Getting Merry Christmas: (1976) :**

It is the third book written between 1949 and 1955. In this work, Angelou describes her struggle with her son and depicts the story of single mother who survives her son in various complexities. The same themes which she has examined in further work, such themes are music, race, motherhood and conflict etc. she has travelled to Europe with the 'Porgy and Bess' troop and got success as a performer.

Maya has gone through struggle to a make a living. Maya shares her own experiences in this book. She left her own son with her mother and travels around 22 countries with the touring company. She feels guilty when she heard bad news about Clyde's health. Soon she left the tour and comes to live with her son Clyde. Both became emotional by their separation and may promises him that she would never leave him again. Maya keeps her promise true and accepts a new job as a performer in 'Hawaii', they both becomes happy for their living and filled with pride for each other.

### **4. The Heart of a Woman: (1981) :**

The fourth autobiography consists with Mayas journey from adulthood to mid-thirties, mother of a university- aged son, lives in Ghana. Maya leaves California with Guy and goes to New York. There she meets many black artists and writers and begins new era with the Harlem writer's guild. She has started to take part in various activities that works for the black Americans simultaneously she continues to sing at Apollo Theatre in Harlem. She has appointed as a coordinator of Martin Luther King.

In the meantime, her personal life has taken a tempestuous turn. She has fallen in love with a south African freedom fighter Vusumzi Make, later on their marriage begins to break up. She didn't mind it and becomes the editor of the English language magazine for the first time in African American history. The story of this book revolves around Maya's life with her son Guy. It chronicles the joys and problems of a black mother's life in black society. Later it reflects the guy's life who becomes a cherished man by her mothers' efforts Angelou resolves the conflicts of her past life and professional life and promise to Guy that she would fulfill his needs and would never be separated from each other.

### **5. All God's Children Needs Travelling Shoes: (1986) :**

It is the fifth autobiography of Angelou that explores the Angelou life in Ghana from 1963 to 1966. It mainly focuses her journey in Africa as her home, Maya struggles with guy, who studies at the university of Ghana. Guy is recovered from a car accident. it is a travelogue written by Maya that enables her to discover her identity from the divorce process that happens in 'The Heart of a Woman'.

Eventually living with African people Maya and guy both feels comfortable. Maya started her new job at the institute of African studies in Accra. In Africa she meets many friends and travels around the Ghana to understand the African American culture. Different themes included in this work. Such as, motherhood, acceptance, racism, survival. Maya Angelou continues her development as a black woman. She is satisfied and accepts her identity as an





African. She understands racism while her travels into Ghana and realized that person can be one, racism cannot separate their identity. Maya discovers her self- esteem that Maya has been lost in her childhood days. Double consciousness sense has been developed through her bonding with black women and African Americans in Ghana.

In Ghana, Maya takes an initiative in political activism that develops her view to look at the African Americans problems in a broader perspective. Ghana's culture closely resembled her with the culture of Arkansas and California. Maya and Guy feel comfortable in Ghana, because there was no problem which based on color and race, people treat others equally. The autobiography is an African narrative that interprets with journey.

## **6. Song Flung Up to Heaven:**

A Song Flung Up to Heaven, is a sixth autobiography, was published in 2002. It is published after thirty years from the date of first autobiography publication time. Maya Angelou establishes a name and became popular as the spokeswoman for the black people. The death of powerful leaders 'Malcolm X' and 'Martin Luther King Jr.' made Maya vacuum. Malcolm X has interest to work with her in developing a group named Organization of African Unity (OOAU). The autobiography begins with Maya travelling back to US from Ghana. Later Maya comes to San Francisco, shortly after her arrival, she heard the news of assassination of Malcolm X through a phone call. For Maya, Malcolm X was the support who helps her to start new life in New York. Maya shares her feeling with Bailey, her pillar of support in her desperate times. Bailey stood with Maya as always and made her realize the frailty of human existence.

Angelou begins her work again with Martin Luther King, Jr. "Maya involved herself in television production and remained active in the Civil Rights Movement, working with Martin Luther King, Jr., who requested that Angelou serve as Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

## **7. Mom and Me and Mom :**

*Mom & Me & Mom* is Angelou's last memoir published in 2013, is about her mother, Vivian Baxter, who runs a boarding house in San Francisco. For the first time, Angelou reveals the triumphs and struggles of being the daughter of Vivian Baxter. When her marriage began to shatter, Vivian sent three-year-old Maya and her older brother away from them to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. Delving into one of her life's most rich, rewarding, and fraught relationships, *Mom & Me & Mom* explores the healing and love that evolved between the two women over the course of their lives, the love that fostered Maya Angelou's rise from immeasurable depths to reach impossible heights.

## **Conclusion :**

The above discussion about the life, works, awards of Maya Angelou shows that her contribution to the African American Literature is unique. She has focused on the plight of black people. She has raised the standard of African American literature with every autobiography. The African American tradition and its changing norms are seen through her



autobiographies. Maya Angelou has shared her experiences of slavery into the autobiographies. Angelou has fulfilled the needs of the readers who are interested in human existence. In fact, many of the people may feel that the stories of her autobiographies are very much related to their life. The language is not complicated and difficult to understand. The chain of events and her experiences are finely interwoven that the curiosity of readers gets excited to read the autobiographies. Her place in literary world is unique.

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