

AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA: AN ALTERED PERSONA IN ANGELOU'S I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

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Abstract

Maya Angelou is best known for her writing several volumes of autobiographies divulging racial discrimination, racial violence, sexuality, the dominance of white authority, racial inequality, and oppression. Her popular autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is acknowledged by readers worldwide and acclaimed for her creative mind. She has also stood for herself by rejecting the social norms and white supremacy. The most important aspect of her stance is that she has openly discussed taboo subjects about sexual violence and sexuality in her writing. Angelou has represented the traumatic experiences, violence, and fear of mob lynching not only for herself but also for the pathetic condition of Blacks in African America. The researcher aims to critically explore traumatic experiences through the disciplines of narratology. Secondly, to delve into Marguerite's journey of transformation into a self-determined woman by accepting herself as well as the Black community in the dominance of white people. The researchers are applying the textual research method of interpretive approach in Angelou's autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

Keywords: Rape, Sexual abuse, Traumatic experience, Alteration, and Transformation.

African- American literature mostly focuses on the realities of black life through the slave narratives. The Black people's trauma, sufferings, and distressing events in their lives are collective memories altogether. They cannot be separated as individuals and communities. The Blacks are victimised due to racial inequality and there are injuries on their Black bodies due to their level of the subordinate. Thus, the wounds, scars, and labelling them as blacks are still tenacious in the current era of the United States of America. Racial discrimination, inequality, and white supremacy are still present in America in the current era as well. For instance, George Floyd, 46, was an African-American man who was murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020. There were numerous incidents and brutal murders of the Blacks in America due to racial supremacy and hatred towards black ethnicity which has a huge psychological impact. According to the Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center, the traumatic incident or series of actions that are bonded with emotions hurts the individual's mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being. Since the ages colored people were treated as subordinate and neglected in the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. However, African American writers have contributed to the diversified spirit of writing in autobiographies, novels, short stories, poems, and literary forms. Therefore, the creation of new narratives and dialogues through writing changes the perspectives on race, culture, politics, religion, and sociology in the United States. African American literature was initiated in the ninetieth century, primarily with slave narratives. Their writings were used as a weapon to fight against injustice. In the 1920s Black artists and intellectuals have arisen during the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance which developed creative authors and projects on the issues of slavery, displacement, suffering, racial discrimination, etc. (Cavanaugh). Alice Walker, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison are well-known novelists in mainstream American literature. They have revealed the vivid and harsh experiences of the Blacks' lives and expose the pathetic conditions and distresses. The discriminatory memories have impacted the mind and black body. Hence suffering and pain of their memories have resulted in fear and trauma forever and it has passed from generation to new generation. However Black feminists have created their space in the literary traditions and helped in the foundations of the modernist movements. Hence black women writers mostly reveal the sexual violence in the larger context of cultural critique and its recovery emphasises and psychologises sexual abuse. (Haaken 1073)

Trauma is associated with one's condition of mind, suffering, distress, and pain through the psychological and emotional behavior of an individual. In trauma, there are different types of aggression including physical and psychological harm by the conduct of the persons in general and the community in the social sphere. The

childhood trauma of an individual remains continuous throughout life. The psychoanalytical approach is closely related to trauma and it applies in literary study. The coherent expression of trauma and literature was found in the middle of the ninetieth century and relies on Freudian theory. It focuses on a model of trauma which depicts the extreme experiences of persons and it analyses the language of written works. Trauma is an unavoidable part of human experience, and everyone has faced the problems of suffering in their lives; it is not only physical but also mental caused by the treatment in the society of minorities. Moreover, women have suffered a lot through the pain of traumatic experiences in society and hence Jeffrey stated, "For trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society" (07). In society, there are different sections and groups of authoritative people who affect the lives of minorities and vulnerable groups. Similarly, Angelou has confronted her everyday life of traumatised incidents about her sufferings and the Black community in the domination of the white world. She has represented the white repressive system that destroyed the identity of colored people through the hegemony of race and culture. A theoretical perspective of trauma reveals the individual personalities and the psychological level of state of mind. The individual experiences and collective traumatic experiences are expressed in the text and explored as "...a link between the experience of individuals and cultural groups or between the personal and political worlds" (Mambrol). Hence Trauma theory has been studied in interdisciplinary fields with allied approaches across the social sciences and the humanities. Therefore, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker played a crucial role in the latter half of the twentieth century in counterfeiting a narrative space for talking about sexual trauma and revealing the self-experiences in their autobiographies which becomes the collective tragedy of their community (Miller 234). On the contrary, they were fighting for their rights and struggling for their existence by transforming themselves into the hegemonic systems of the white world.

The tragic trauma has different categories of identities in the life of Maya (Marguerite Johnson) and her brother Bailey Jr. who have suffered since their childhood. Maya has found that after several years as Black children they had been sent back to their grandparents in south regions because of the safety reasons in America. Even though both of them are sent to her grandmother Annie Henderson in Stamps. The Black children were having issues of acceptance since childhood and it resulted in traumatic memories in their lives. At the same time, they were not safe in the surrounding of white supremacy. Also, their parents' had relationship problems and ended their marriage and it impacted the lives of Marguerite and Jr. Bailey. As Angelou asserts that "Years later I discovered that the United States had been crossed thousands of times by frightened Black children traveling alone to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities..." (Angelou 07). The continuous displacement distresses the black community because they do not belong anywhere due to white dominance. Black men, women, and children have a record of the assaults, lynching, and history of violence which projects in their memories and live with the burden of fear. For instance, Angelou remarks that if Black boxer Joe Louis lost in the match with white, then there was fear amongst the Black community and predicts the various atrocities on the black body. The fear itself is a trauma to the Blacks and a burden on their psychological tendencies which are stated as:

"My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful" (146).

The Black people's life was not only unsafe in the south but also it has expatriate hence as Angelou avows in the untitled prologue "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat" (06). Henceforth being a black body, itself is a big trauma for the colored people living in the white society. The displacement has deeply impacted the mindset of Blacks through the ages and it has traumatised them into destitutions of assortment as Hron explains "...experience a variety of hardships, from mental disorders to somatic pain, and from social alienation to economic discrimination" (288). Thus, black children suffered a lot due to the alienation effect on the other side they have to face and struggle to build their individuality in American society. The pain of disillusionment is long-lasting because of the abandonment by her family at the age of childhood.

Angelou has suffered traumatic events in her entire life since childhood. She has lived a series of continuously atrocious events in her life and it has been revealed in her popular autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). She has represented the violence, trauma, and fear of mob lynching not only for herself but also for the pathetic condition of Blacks in African America. The traumatic experiences, suffering, emotional distress, forms of abuse, and pain are the harsh realities that destructed her existence during childhood. However, she has resisted the dominance and racial hierarchies through her strong stance and powerful narratives in the autobiography. Her sense of realistic narratology depicts the memory of sexual abuse and rape at the age of eight in her life. Furthermore, sexual abuse affects traumatic memory which suppresses one's own identity. Marguerite has suffered since her childhood and faced sexual abuse from her mother's white boyfriend Mr. Freeman. As Socolovsky amplifies that "The violated or abused body, as a site of trauma" (196). The Black body and women are the victims of the social white racial hierarchies and dominance. The traumatic memories are stuck to the bodies of women and also become the site of suffering. Even though she has not given up because of the suffering

and problems in her life. However, she has crafted her own identity in society and it was her strong stance to be a part of the system instead of rejecting it. Hence it has the major path building for her own and to Black community and breaking the boundaries of racial discrimination. Furthermore, her father Daddy Bailey Johnson's girlfriend Dolores Stockland had tabbed Marguerite because of acceptance issues with them. She hated Maya because of her physical appearance. She fought with Marguerite and pointed out her mother as a whore. In this argument, she cut her, as Angelou depicts the physical trauma "On the steps I felt something wet on my arm and looked down to find blood.... I put my arm back to my waist and it brought fresh blood as I pulled it away. I was cut" (263). As a black girl, she has faced various calamities in her life since her childhood due to her continuous rejection and identity politics. These events became traumas and obstructed her mind at every stage. On the contrary, she has the confidence to rise herself and contributed to bringing her community into the mainstream through her strong contemplation and activism in the social, political, cultural, and economic spheres.

The representation of the trauma is not only before anything happened to an individual or collective in the Black community but also by the authoritative systems treated unequally in multifaced hegemonic dimensions. The color of politics "white" is associated with pure, powerful, and civilised. On the contrary, black were treated as impure, uncivilised, and weak. Henceforth the binary opposition creates and divides the gaps between white and black. Similarly, Marguerite has been victimised by the ascendancy of white culture. Even Marguerite's playmates described her as "shit color" which is culturally associated with Black skin. However, she was fond of being a white girl and has a dream of becoming like a white because it was fixed deeply in her mind. Therefore, Angelou asserts in the Untitled Prologue as "I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world" (04). Color politics is also one of the forms of discrimination and it injects into the social hierarchical order and conquered the weaker sections of any society.

The transformation of traumatic memories into narrative memories of positivism reflects the generosity of being proud of the Black community in Maya Angelou's most popular autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Her memories are a strong resistance against the brutal systems as well as help her in the reconstruction of herself. The psychological and mental prison has been imposed by the white in American society. At the same time, blacks have been excluded from the mainstream and have not been given any equal opportunities for a long time. Hence the rejection itself is a form of trauma in an autobiography. On the other side literature is a source of inspiration for Angelou to overcome the different traumatic events in her life. She has chosen to transform herself based on framing her own identity as well as the black community. She has struggled to get her space in the white dominance system. Her love for language and literature shapes her rationality. It helps her to stand against racial hierarchies. Mrs. Flowers, a white woman in town has introduced the book of a poem to Marguerite and cultivated knowledge in incredible ways which helps her in the creation of her path. As Angelou stated, "She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be" (102). She has encouraged Marguerite at the age of childhood so that she stands on her own even though there were many obstacles in her life. She lived an extraordinary life rising from poverty, physical abuse, trauma, violence, racial inequality, lynching, and so on.

Marguerite's determination to become a streetcar conductorette in San Francisco displays the breaking of barriers of racial discrimination and segregation in American society. Even her mother Vivian was conscious of the fact that (white) people are not accepting colored people to get the job as easily but Marguerite's stance indicates the social deconstruction of Black people in the domain of white dominance. At last, she was hired as the first Negro on the San Francisco streetcars. Her strong willpower rejected the myths which were imposed on Blacks as 'weaker and inferior' by the white society. Her awareness of life through the reshaping of her identity supports her to become much wiser and more independent as she points out that "...I had learned and earned the magic formula which would make me a part of the gay life my contemporaries led" (290). Furthermore, she has faced tragic incidences in her journey but she stood for herself and her community by counterattacking the norms of "tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power" (291).

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