



## Portrayal of Female Identity Crisis and Social Representation of Women in Maya Angelou's Work

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### ABSTRACT

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feminist literature,  
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*Feminist literature is a peculiar product of twentieth century. Maya Angelou is a black African American female writer who contributed to the development of feminist literature with the central claims of female identity and societal representation of women. This study aims to highlight female identity crisis and social representation of women in autobiographies and poems of Maya Angelou. The study uses descriptive-qualitative method for the analysis of data. Textual analysis of Angelou's poems and autobiographies represents lives of women lived in American society under masculine dominancy of previous century. The results of the study detect a strong reaction to the issue of female identity crisis and recessive social role of women in the poems and autobiographies of Maya Angelou.*

### INTRODUCTION

Identity is one of the most important aspects of human life. Identity plays an immensely important role in social life of human beings. The word 'identity' is used for social relation or identification of individuals on the basis of social groups (tribes). The traditional approach of identity deals with the recognition of people through ethnicity, language, religion, culture, and politics (Mustafa, 2006). According to Mark and Price (2012), identities are some of the characteristics of human beings like social relations, roles, and social group memberships. These concepts of identity lack the aspect of identity which is more related to social construct of identity of men and women and is known as gender. According to Wendy and Alice (2015), the identity based on gender is the reflection of people's understanding of themselves under the social labels of male and female. These social labels of male and female are used for differences in gender. The identity is to define is the identification of people on the bases of social backgrounds and gender differences.

World's literature is much conceived with the idea of identity based on gender. In mid of twentieth century, world's perception about the identification of gender changed gradually by

means of social representation of male and female (Hans, 2013). In early twentieth century, American society gifted with feminist writers who noted an anarchy on their pages against gender discrimination (Permatasari, 2016). African American writers made contribution to the development of feminist literature. According to Jayalakshmi and Abeetha (2017), African American literature which is produced by female writers in the revolutionary era of twentieth century is the most celebrated literature in society and has a deep impact on the social constructs of feminism. Writers like Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou represented themselves as the true propagator of feminist ideas and worked for female identity in American society. The writing of Maya Angelou is the depiction of a woman who is often punished by men in her life (Shimayan, 2013).

The purpose of Angelou's writing is to expose the realities of women's lives. In one of her autobiographies, Angelou writes 'the black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the time she caught in the tripartite confessor of masculine prejudice'. This depicts her troubles in life. She grew in such surrounding of antipathies between genders and races. These animosities between races and genders made Angelou as a revolutionary writer (Sharma, 2018).

Maya Angelou dreamed a world of her own identity and rise (Najpal, 2017). This assures that throughout her life, Maya Angelou fought against the social evil of gender discrimination and as a result Angelou produced a vast body of African American literature.

The stories of Maya Angelou are based on her personal identity as black African American (Assefei, 2012) and therefore Angelou's poetry has a duty to the identity of women, so that women would no longer be considered as suppressed and unidentified by male dominated society. Being a female, Angelou was ill-treated in society but she did not surrender her well in front of patriarchal dominancy of the time (Ramesh, 2014). As it is clear from her lines:

*You may write me down  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust I'll rise.* (Still I rise, 1978)

Through the art of writing, Maya Angelou stood as the source of inspiration for the women of twentieth century and also of subsequent times (Kottesswari and Abnarasi, 2017). In writing, Angelou focused upon the social problems of women. Angelou witnessed the unending sufferings of women in society throughout the twentieth century. As Angelou argues 'she must resist considering herself a lesser version of her male counterpart' in next Lines, she says '*a rose by any other name may smell as sweet, but a woman called by a devaluing name will be weakened by the misnomer*' (In all Ways a Woman).

Maya Angelou is a role model specifically for African American women as Angelou presented image of a black woman in her autobiographies (Abinaya, 2017). Angelou's writing is the best epitome of the epoch which records a rise and popularity of female identity. Maya Angelou's writings enunciated inferiority and superiority complex regarding male dominated society and her autobiographies also found with a combat for equality between men and women (Jain and Solomon, 2014). Angelou narrated all the misconceptions of the age regarding unconsidered identity of women. Angelou's poetry is enriched with elements of social cry and outcast. She wants a symmetry between Americans and African-Americans, and for this purpose she writes in her poem 'Equality' (2015);

*Equality, and I will be free.*

*Equality, and I will be free.*

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study used descriptive-qualitative method for the analysis of the data. Data is randomly collected from poems and autobiographies in the form of sentences and verses and is described qualitatively. The data is collected from Maya Angelou's three autobiographies "Heart of Woman", "Still I Rise", and "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and four poems "Still I Rise", "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", "Phenomenal Woman", and "When I Think About Myself". After collecting the data, the researcher has analysed lines of poems an extract of autobiographies supported by the idea of female identity crisis in relation with feminism. The study is framed under the yoke of theoretical framework of feminism by Eka Permatasari (2016).

### **Identity crisis:**

Erickson has made view of identity crisis which is usually found in child hood and later stages of development and deals with the identity of human beings during different stages of development. (qtd in Mishra, 2015). This concept of identity crisis is related to the process of human development and has nothing to present about the crisis which are based on ethnicity, social class, and gender as these are the main propagators of identity. According to Merriam Webster dictionary, identity crisis are psychological conflicts in adolescence and related to the social role of people. The social role of people is basically related to the social positions of people like ethnicity, gender and religion.

### **Female identity crisis:**

According to Ghorfati and Medini (2015), women are the sufferers of domestic and social problems; they are facing hurdles to have some importance in social life. Past reveals that women were deprived of their basic rights. They withered in the patriarchal hands of the society. The history of female identity shows the women as lacked of identity and as a result a continuous struggle was started in the beginning of twentieth century. According to Eka Permatasari (2016), the last decades of nineteenth century and the early decades of twentieth century have witnessed

dramatic changes in the lives of women in United States and United Kingdom. The women were given some of their rights like equal contract, marriage and property rights. These changes in the lives of female are labelled under the yoke of feminism. Bhavyal 2016, has made an attempt that feminism provides us the foundation of women rights and applies a sense of equality between male and female, it also gives us a sort of awareness of female identity and defines the problems associated with women. As a result of this view the concept of feminism laid down a better account of female identity crisis in the world's literature.

## ANALYSIS

Female identity crisis is recorded by world's literature and many writers discussed it in their studies. Maya Angelou is one of those writers who wrote about the identity of women and favored the idea of feminism. As Angelou says 'am I woman first, or am I black first' (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings).

Maya Angelou, through her autobiographies created a picture of women, suffered of every kind of discrimination in American society. Dull identity of women is shown in poetry and autobiographies of Maya Angelou. Angelou fought through the weapon of poetry against the evils in her surroundings. Angelou's composition of verses is a careful observation of life of females in the sense of their role in society. As Angelou says in her poem 'Still I Rise'

*"Cause I walk like I've got gold wells;*

.....

*Cause I walk like I've got gold mines (7-11)*

In these lines, Angelou complains about the objectification of women as the source of pleasure for men. Women have a positive contribution in the development of a country but still they are lacked of equal rights and even deprived of identity. Angelou like Harriet Beecher Stowe focused upon female identity crisis and gender discrimination which was the main issue of concern in America throughout twentieth century.

Maya Angelou has bravely discussed female identity issues in twentieth century. The literary works of Angelou accounted the identity crisis and a sort of discrimination associated to a female living in the streets of Missouri and misused by masculine dominancy of the time. As she says;

*'his wings are clipped*

*his feet are tied*

*so he opens his throat to sing.'* (12-14)

The above lines are elaborated from Angelou's poem 'I Know Why Caged Bird Sings'. Here, Angelou is representing females as a caged bird which is caged and tied by men. The caged bird is standing for a woman whose wings (hands) are clipped and is not able to act according to her own will. The cage symbolizes the territory of a house which is solely constructed by men in the

society. The phrase ‘his feet are tied’, shows her enslavement by men where she cannot move properly in the direction of that destination where she can find her own life free from the clutches of patriarchy. It shows that there is always an invisible line drawn around the boundary of the house which is prohibited to cross. The last line shows her voice for freedom and the songs of independence as she cannot protest openly because of clipped hands and tied feet. Through her voice, Angelou wants to expose that harsh reality of her own life as her freedom and identity are corrupted by men.

The publication of Angelou’s autobiography by the same title of ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ in 1969 is the account of her own sufferings in the hands of men. In this autobiography, Angelou narrated her own story of her sufferings in young age. The autobiography is a written document which is symbolising the ‘caged bird’ with the life of a female who is raped and kept by man as she argues in this autobiography, “I believe most plain girls are virtuous because of the scarcity of opportunity to be otherwise”. This is how Maya Angelou labels girls as scarce and trivial in the society. Angelou says that they are considered scarce otherwise they are not. This shows the contribution of Maya Angelou to the identity of women.

Maya Angelou has the idea of women and their goodness but still they are treated badly, as she argues in her poem ‘Phenomenal Woman’:

*It’s in the click of my heels,*

*The bend of my hair,*

*The palm of my hand,*

*The need for my care, (53-55)*

‘The click of my heels’ shows women from head to heel and their hair and hands are for men’s sake. Women have got important roles. These lines show a kind of quest about the ignorance of women in society as the world has neglected their importance and they are facing discrimination. According to Maya Angelou, a woman from heel to head and from hair to hands must be protected from all sorts of discrimination. In the last line Angelou argues a necessity of care for women.

‘The years and cold defeat live deep in Lines along my face. They dull my eyes, yet I keep on dying, Because I love to live’ (Angelou, Still I Rise). This shows the hopes of Maya Angelou which are destroyed by the men and still she wants to live. Maya Angelou has the view of female popularity and rising in her mind. Angelou discussed the feminine life and suffrage in this autobiography ‘Sill I Rise’.

In contrast of men, women suffer from all kinds of grudges. They are used just for the sake of working and this element of injustice is clear from the following lines;

*Sixty years in these folks' world*

*The child I works for calls me girl*

*I say 'yes ma'am for working's sake*

*Too proud to bend*

*Too poor to break (8-12)*

The above lines are from the poem 'When I Think About Myself'. Angelou's experience and her suffering period is comprised of sixty years. It means that for whole life, Angelou experienced the mistreatments of male dominated society. The line 'yes ma'am for working's sake' is narrating a story of a black female working and she is too proud as she is tolerating these miseries and ill treatments and at the same time, she is very poor to break or to protest against such discrimination. In these lines, Maya Angelou shows that how women are used for the sake of working and they are withered in the hands of men in American society. Angelou says that these sixty years which she spent in the age of ignorance are full of inequalities and antipathies. Angelou had been used as a commodity in her surroundings.

'Don't let the man bring you down'. Maya Angelou said in one of her autobiographies 'The Heart of a Woman'. Angelou wants to say that woman must not be dominated by a man and if she is, it means she would suffer. In the same autobiography, Angelou further argued; 'If I survived at all, it would be a triumph. If I swam, it would be a miracle'. Here, Angelou compared her surviving as a great victory and if she had survived in such surroundings dominated by men where women were lacked of proper place and identity and if she gets even basic rights then it would a great victory for her.

## DISCUSSION

Angelou's works were heavily loaded with the ideology of feminism. She was a strong supporter of this political and social movement. It has been observed that her target was the women enslaved to the territorial boundaries of their homes. The slavery she mentioned in her poem "I Know Why Caged Bird Sings" was not physical slavery but the mental imprisonment of women in American society. She made them realize about their status as a human. Angelou stands as a source of inspiration particularly for women of United States. She wanted the females to find their identities and stop looking themselves from male's perspective. She triggered the provocative thoughts of sexual and gender issues of the society. Her views not only opened eyes of females but also shaken patriarchal beliefs of the society.

Her autobiography "Heart of Women" incarnate the shattered souls of women from the soil of United States. Her this piece of writing reveals the untouched desires of females. She is holding a mirror to the society through her autobiographies and is trying to portray the struggles of females in the suffocated environment of patriarchal hold. It is prominent through her hard efforts

that she is trying to pen the cries of women in her writings in order to grasp the attention of readers to the ever-green issue of female sufferings.

The discussion of social section of women is the primary goal of Angelou's work. Poems and autobiographies of Angelou grants a political and social identity for women of the United States. Angelou's autobiographies account that in domain of patriarchal culture, women have no social construction regarding their identity. Angelou's female characters in her autobiographies show that women are identified from a masculine perspective based on discrimination. Angelou portrayed the conventional image of women painted on the canvas of men. The proposing aims of Angelou's poetry and autobiographies is to get female out of the masculine control of the society and to give them a social identity that is to be free from men's perception of social constructs of female identity.

Search for identity and an invulnerable social position in society is the core point printed on the pages of Maya Angelou's poetry. In her poem "When I Think About Myself", Angelou raised issues that examining the subordinate role of women in the society. Angelou resisted against the traditional views of women from the eye of men. According to her work, women are subservient to men. This claim gave a vital charm to verses of Angelou, questioned the subversion of women and asked for equal ground between men and women. Consequently, the work of Maya Angelou has deeply rooted into the lives of females as it aims to identify women as an infrangible part of society. The writing of Maya Angelou is the written account that bolster women to achieve their identity.

## **CONCLUSION**

Twentieth century marks the beginning of rise in discussion of female identity. Many writers questioned the social life of women. Previous century noticed dramatic changes in lives of women in United States. Female African American writers held the argument regarding desires, sexuality, self-definition, existence and destiny of women in the context of issues of identity crisis. Maya Angelou wrote the same argument which is questioning the independence and self-identity of African-American women of United States. After the close analysis of her selected poems and autobiographies, this study shows the struggle of Angelou to bring change in the conventional image of black women constructed by conservative social views of the public. In a nutshell, Maya Angelou wanted to achieve the legal rights of black women through the raise of voice for the socio-legal rights in her poetry and autobiographies.

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