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Trauma and Healing: Resurgence of Self in the Autobiographies of Maya Angelou

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Abstract

The present article explores how Maya Angelou endured multiple traumas—emotional, psychological, racial and cultural particularly from her Autobiographies *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name*, *Singin’*, *Swingin’* and *Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* and how she has received healing from the adverse effects of multiple traumas and achieved self-realisation. Maya Angelou, an African American writer, shares many traumatic experiences that are common to the black community settled in America besides having her own specific traumatic experiences. This paper focuses on the traumatic experiences of Maya Angelou and how she helped herself to heal her past angst and trauma. Maya Angelou, an African American woman caged by her traumatic experiences from childhood, emerges as a phenomenal woman harbouring no vengeance and detestation towards those who oppressed and inflicted pain on her, eliciting curiosity in the reader. Having overcome all the odds in life and the negative emotions and sense of worthlessness the trauma generated in her, Angelou emerged like a Phoenix that rose from its ashes. Her autobiographies can be called the epitome of script therapy. Scriptotherapy is healing through writing down one’s traumatic experience and pain. Maya Angelou recorded her works in autobiographies, which brought her complete healing. On analysing Angelou’s life, it becomes evident that her wounded and bruised self was healed completely through catharsis, which led to self-discovery and self-actualization. Angelou, a confident and cheerful black woman who is proud of her Negro lineage and physical appearance, has commanded respect and acceptance from people all over the world. Maya Angelou’s life mirrors the experiences of women and black women in particular, as her journey is symbolic of agony experienced in the twentieth century by women of different races.

Keywords: Memory, Trauma, Catharsis, Displacement, Repression, Alienation, Scriptotherapy

Maya Angelou was one of the prominent black women writers who challenged through her writings the racial and patriarchal society that oppressed blacks and made them feel inferior and ashamed of their black colour. Her writings brought a new genre of expression, autobiographical fiction, centred on black women's lives and how they were impacted by a more comprehensive social and political system. Angelou's first work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is a tool in the fight for equality. It portrays dreadful traumatic experiences that overshadowed her childhood and her struggles to cope with challenging situations. Despite oppression, she cherishes the richness of African American culture, family values, warm social and community life, and economic and political life, depicted vividly in her works.

This research paper posits that suffering cannot defeat an individual; a superior personality will emerge due to suffering and endurance. Elliott, Jeffrey, in "Maya Angelou: In Search of Self." quotes Angelou's powerful words: "We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. ...I believe that a diamond results from extreme pressure and time. Less time is crystal. Less than that is coal. Less than that is fossilised leaves. Less than that, it's just plain dirt"(694). This study aims at infusing fresh life into the battered and bruised souls who are inextricably caught up in the labyrinth of traumatic experiences by citing how a total resurgence of one's self can be accomplished without any trace of hatred or vengeance against the perpetrators through a deep study of the life and works of Maya Angelou, an African American author who attained an incredible degree of self-actualisation despite enduring unutterable assaults on her Self. An exploration into the select autobiographies of the said author *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name*, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, which lay bare the traumatic experiences she has undergone as a black displaced child, a lonely teenager and an unwed mother. This study attempts to analyse the factors that have contributed to the evolution of Angelou's self.

Many factors shape the 'self' of an individual during the different phases of one's growth. Maya Angelou's autobiographies, especially *The Caged Bird*, bear testimony to the multilayered trauma Maya Angelou underwent in the process of growing up in a segregated South as a Black girl who struggled against the triple institution of classism, racism and sexism. Angelou's summation in this regard is significant. She observes:

The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in that tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power (CB 272).

Multiple traumas experienced by Maya Angelou began at the tender age of three when she faced the stark reality of the separation from her parents. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, her first memoir, records poignantly the agony of separation, subsequent displacement and associated painful experiences that parade her life. Maya confidently “reaches back in memory to pull out painful times” throughout her narratives” (Braxton 23). After her parents had decided to “put an end to their calamitous marriage” (CB 5), her father took her. Her brother Bailey, aged three and four respectively, from their mother, put identification and destination tags on their wrists with a general instruction, “To Whom It May Concern” (CB 5). She sends them unescorted by train to Mrs. Henderson, their paternal grandmother in the South. The journey to a segregated Southern state, Stamps Arkansas, all by themselves without any adult supervision is a harrowing experience for these toddlers. While travelling all by themselves through strange lands, hungry, thirsty and confused, their little hearts are filled with extreme fear and sadness. However, as young children, they cannot comprehend the emotional and psychological ramifications of the whole rigmarole. The sense of insecurity and fear imprinted on their minds during this traumatic journey is explicit when she says:

A porter had been charged with our welfare – he got off the train the next day in Arizona –and our tickets were pinned to my brother’s inside coat pocket.... Negro passengers, who always travelled with loaded lunch boxes felt sorry for “the poor little motherless darlings” and plied us with cold fried chicken and potato salad (CB5).

This incident unsettles Maya and creates negative emotions of fear, insecurity, rejection, and helplessness. For years, Maya says, she thought what her parents had done was a cruel act, but then she discovered that she and Bailey were just part of a multitude of black children whose parents would take them out of the segregated South with the hope that things would

turn out better for them. To their disappointment, when they realise it is not always so, the parents send the children back to the South to their grandparents while their parents wrestle and struggle to improve their living conditions. Therefore, one constant threat faced by enslaved African American families is the perpetual likelihood of parting with one or more members. Enslaver's affluence lay mainly in the number of enslaved people he owned, and he enjoyed frequent selling and purchasing of enslaved people. A whole host of situations brought about sales. An enslaved person could be a part of an estate, and when the owner died, he would be sold along with the estate. A slave family may be split when the father is sold away, leaving behind the mother and children or as part of the inheritance, the slave families may be divided. Though the slave families were adversely affected or broken by these decisions, they had no say in the matter at all. While narrating this personal traumatic incident, Angelou recalls the broader spectrum by inviting the readers' attention to the role of the economy in deciding the family structure of blacks:

Years later, I discovered that the United States had crossed thousands of times by frightened Black children travelling alone to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities or back to grandmothers in Southern towns when the urban North reneged on its economic promises (CB 5).

Adult slaves of the family knew the possibility of sale, and the fear of separation haunted them constantly. Children are innocently unaware of the potential but experience the sting of such separations sooner. They are ferried across to segregated areas like Arkansas, where their grandmothers lived, or they are sold as enslaved people, upsetting the domestic fabric of Black families. As a sharp critique of slave oppression, Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white northern abolitionist, used the theme of family disintegration in her novel 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'. Frederick Douglass openly wrote in his book 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave' that his mother, who lived and worked miles away, trudged that distance every day to see him late at night as he lived with his grandmother. He never knew who his father was, although the rumour said it was his enslaver. An obligation to serve the owner takes precedence over family and children. Both Douglass and Stowe maintained vehemently that it was morally wrong to indulge in the slave trade and that the devastation of families was one of the severe fallouts of it. The displacement experienced becomes double-layered for the children as they are dislocated from home and their parents and alienated due to racial oppression. Angelou draws the attention of the readers to the insecurity, instability,

fear and loneliness the Black children experienced by their separation from their families. As told to Marcia Ann Gillespie, Angelou lets the readers see that knowing the different layers of African American experiences is critical to comprehending her childhood and that of African American families. As an aftermath of this incident, trepidation and diffidence haunted Maya and Bailey for a long time as children who were abandoned by their parents at a tender age when they had to be loved and protected. McPherson (1999) posits that Angelou offers essential insights into “the effects of social conditioning on the mind and emotions of a black child growing up in a hostile environment- an imprisoning environment” (24). In the first volume of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou stresses the displacement experienced as the worst loss she faced in her childhood and that she has never wholly regained a sense of security and belonging.

Angelou’s autobiography can be called an example of script therapy, too. Scriptotherapy is healing through writing down one’s traumatic experience and pain. Though the scripture reading and the subsequent self-discovery have offered healing to Maya Angelou, recording them in autobiographies has brought her complete healing. On analysing Angelou’s life, it becomes evident that her wounded and bruised self was healed completely through catharsis, which led to self-discovery and self-actualisation. Maya Angelou was introduced in the opening chapter of *Caged Bird* as a self-conscious, frightened, insecure and shy child who could not recite her poem in the church. But she has come a long way through trudging through a thorny path to the stature of a ‘phenomenal woman’, a confident and cheerful person who is proud of her Negro lineage and physical appearance and commands respect and acceptance from people all over the world. Maya Angelou’s life mirrors the experiences of women and black women in particular, as her journey is symbolic of agony experienced in the twentieth century by women of different races. Getting rid of negative thoughts through emotional and psychological healing may empower an individual, and Angelou’s life bears testimony to the power of emotional and spiritual healing. Scriptures can be an agent of reformation of one’s self. On judging oneself as inadequate, flawed, unworthy, or undeserving of all the blessings a life can bring, one can block the innate wisdom that flows naturally through heart and soul by being connected to the Absolute. Catharsis, mainly through reading and reflection of scriptures and prayer, is a process of purgation which facilitates the removal of emotions that are in excess in one and brings about self-realisation, which in turn leads to the resurgence of one’s self. Thus, the emotional and psychological

catharsis gained through sharpening one's spiritual intelligence becomes the launch pad to one's self – self-actualisation.

To conclude, the fundamental building blocks for the resurgence of self for those who are windswept by trauma are identifying the negative emotions that rule their life in the light of scriptures or similar reading and eliminating them through the process of catharsis. People who are drawn towards negative emotions or are unable to reconcile with the expectations and the challenges emanating from these expectations may go through this journey of self-actualisation with difficulties. Still, it is an effort towards getting healed.

Having received emotional and psychological healing akin to a wounded and bleeding bird in a cage, Maya Angelou can now liberate herself and soar high in the sky of freedom, singing melodies full throat. The resurgence of her Self filled her with new vigour, a spirit of industry, courage and self-confidence, and she is now poised to capture all the opportunities by exploring her talents and potential to the best of her abilities with spiritual Intelligence as her most important resource. This has put her on the magnificent avenue of self-actualisation, a continuous process. As one proceeds towards self-actualisation, more avenues to be explored will be opened. Maya Angelou says in *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey*: "The idyllic condition cannot be arrived at and held on to eternally. It is in the search itself that one finds the ecstasy."(73) As the Bible says, 'the seeds have fallen on fertile soil'. Though the seeds were crushed and choked by the thorns of the world's cares, Maya guarded these seeds, and in due course of time, they bore fruit and yielded thirty, sixty and hundredfold (Mathew 13 .18-23). Her resurgence is akin to a phoenix in Greek mythology that arose to a new life from the ashes of its predecessor.

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