

# Unwinding the Identity and Racial Saga in Maya Angelou's *Gather Together in My Name*

Ruth Neyah V

School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India

Vijayakumar M\*

School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India

**Abstract**—The desideratum of this study is to evaluate the racial and identity perspective in the work of Maya Angelou, predominantly in her second autobiography. The racial and identity aspect in *Gather Together in My Name*, Maya Angelou's autobiographical work, will be the objective of the study. It highlights the racial encounters and identity crisis brought out by Maya Angelou. Her second autobiographical book follows the story of the author's life as a projection of American culture. It aims to look at Angelou's autobiography as just an illustration of a few of the issues that exist amongst racial groups in America, particularly concerning African-Americans who are constantly trying to find ways and establish themselves like normal citizens. The autobiography portrays Angelou's fight for her and other black women's rights in the United States and around the globe. She has uncovered significant certainties to any ear which can hear it. Her personal assertions present an incredible and true state of Afro-American womanhood as she continued looking for comprehension and love. She has freely examined her own life. The current paper delivers an investigation of the racial and identity aspect as it gradually unfurls Angelou's recreation of the dark-skinned women.

**Index Terms**—racism, African-American, ethnic hatred, Afro phobia, identity crisis

## I. INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou hailed as a worldwide renaissance lady, is a praised writer, memoirist, author, instructor, playwright, maker, entertainer and social liberties dissident. She has obtained a significant situation in the scholarly scene of Afro-American composition. *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou's second autobiographical novel takes place soon after the birth of her son, Guy, and recounts her heroic battle to cater for him as a lone parent. Angelou's self-portrayal *Gather Together in My Name*, recounts the tale of a youthful mother Maya Angelou with her recently conceived child (Guy) subsequent to going out.

Maya Angelou sets different positions up to make due in the unforgiving climate of metropolitan life. Maya, both as a mother and a labourer, can't adapt to the troubles of city life. Her sibling Bailey acts as the hero and the book closes with restoring her blamelessness. She does a lot to disprove the restrictive view of parenting held by women employees. *Gather Together in My Name* took three and a half years to develop following the triumph of *Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The author also suffers from sensations of frustration, remorse, and resentment due to the disparity between the liberal notion of American society and her existence as an African-American as a result of her relocation (Sari, 2017).

Angelou's depictions of oneself, household, and societal upheaval thus give her the space she needs to analyse the disparities in her situation, along with her emotional responses to them. Angelou is unambiguous in her journey for her autobiographical narrative, driven to examine the implications of her genetic background. She has opened new vistas of dark female concealment through her personal history. She is known for her series of six personal volumes zeroing in on her youth and early grown-up encounters. Angelou's dual identity as a woman and an African American helps her to build her own identity (Mohanlal et al., 2014).

Maya Angelou's compositions, like her, are one-of-a-kind; however, they also share characteristics with other African American autobiographical works. Humans ought not to be divided and classed based on their ethnicity or gender because they are all supposed to be equal. Those that disagree with the situation formed an association to pool their resources and ideas. Many of them even rise to the top of organisations and organise protests to secure their privileges. Regrettably, there are still some African-American women who tolerate prejudice and class distinction. They tend to believe that all that unfolds to them is completely normal.

It's fascinating to examine this story because it shows how an African-American woman battles societal racial injustice (Nuraini, 2008). She is grossly mistreated because she is a human, and she is controlled by a man because she is a woman. She is subjected to double stereotypes and prejudices. Angelou's autobiographies all follow the same format: they provide a brief history of the areas she previously lived, how she functioned only within the backdrop of broader racist supremacy, and just how her tale unfolded within a certain environment.

---

\* Corresponding author

According to critic Selwyn Cudjoe, Angelou is still obsessed with the concerns of how much it implies to be an African American woman in the United States in *Gather Together*, but she emphasizes herself at a specific period in life, in the decades following the Second World War. The human psyche is wired to focus on the situation that appears to be upsetting at the minute, which leads to the impulse to write about it since authors take pleasure and satisfaction in sharing their anguish or delight throughout this activity (Cudjoe, 1984).

## II. THE RACIST SAGA AND ANGELOU'S IDEOLOGIES

The story begins with a prologue that describes the African-American society's bewilderment and disappointment at that moment, which resembled the detached and fractured quality of the protagonist's existence. As reported by McPherson, African-Americans were offered a "new racial order", but it never materialised (McPherson, 1990).

Midway through *Gather Together*, an event occurs that reveals how Rita and her grandma deal with racism in diverse situations. When Rita is humiliated by a fair-skinned clerk, in one of her visits to Stamps, she responds with disdain, but Momma hits Rita and forces her to return to California once she learns about the disagreement. Rita believes her right to privacy has been infringed, but the realistic Momma recognises that her granddaughter's actions are harmful. Rita's grandmother isn't any longer a major figure in her life, and Angelou explains that in the struggle against racism, she had to go ahead.

The autobiographies of Maya Angelou, including this one, have been utilised in professional education to improve narratives and multicultural methods. *I Know why the caged bird sings* and *Gather Together in my name* have been utilised by Dr. Jocelyn A. Glazier, to teach educators how to explore racism in the curriculum. Angelou's utilisation of subtlety, ego, humour, and sarcasm, thus according to Glazier, causes readers of the second autobiography (*gather together in my name*) and the remaining autobiographies of Angelou to question the elements that she has missed out and the manner in which she reacted to the actions depicted by her.

White readers are forced to examine their views about racism and their favoured situation as a result of Angelou's depictions of her racist encounters. Despite analysts' insistence on Angelou's belongingness, under the purview of the African American style of autobiography and her textual approaches, Glazier discovered that audiences engage to her narration with astonishment, specifically when start reading the book with specific preconceptions about the type of autobiography. Maya Angelou's self-portraying articulation is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American artistic pursuits. The focal point of her composing is worried about the topic of being Black and female in America. Her life accounts acquaint us with a universe of prostitution and pimps, rascals and road ladies, illicit drug use and otherworldly crumbling.

Maya resided in a society where that bigotry and sexism were two horrendous parts of the social air that prepared for the oppression and underestimation of African American ladies. She was very much aware of the climate that encompassed her yet she never lost expectation, she generally strived to track down arrangements (Benkouider, 2019). She felt that each modest calling was intended for the Blacks and they couldn't try to become anything higher than that. Blacks, as they were cognizant with regards to the way that they were by default, were assumed to be hard-pressed and graceless. They made an honest effort to show the best of their habits before the Whites (Putranto, 2007).

The highlight noted here is that Blacks needed to be perceived as equivalents. They didn't look for any exceptional consideration; this by implication focuses on the way that they were for the most part not treated well and that was the explanation they required for exceptional consideration. During her school days, Maya enjoyed those individuals who were apathetic regarding her race, rather than those who treated her with pity and attempted to be thoughtful to her.

## III. IDENTITY CRISIS IN GATHER TOGETHER IN MY NAME

As a Black lady, Angelou exhibits the development of her own social character all through her stories and has utilized her numerous jobs, manifestations, and personalities to associate the layers of persecution inside her own set of experiences. Likewise, Angelou introduces herself to be a good example to the coloured women all the more comprehensively by recreating the image of a black woman through topics of individual strength and the capacity to overcome. All through the works of Maya Angelou, her investigation is about the ones who impacted her advancement and development. (Lauret, 1994).

Angelou's unique objective was to expound on the existence of coloured women in the United States, however, her comprehensive writings record both the good and bad times of her existence too. Angelou's collections of memoirs give a verifiable outline to the spots where she made her life and how she adapted inside the setting of bigoted fair-skinned supremacy. In Angelou's subsequent volume, *Gather Together in My Name*, she was worried about what it intended to be a coloured woman America, from the perspective of her own insight. Essayist Selwyn Cudjoe says with regard to her subsequent collection of memoirs that "the incidents in the book appear merely gathered together in the name of Maya Angelou" (Cudjoe, 1984).

This estrangement was the consequence of social isolation. The Blacks and Whites lived in discrete areas. There were no normal social affairs or different possibilities where they could know one another. The Blacks have recounted accounts of racial brutality between the Blacks and the Whites hence the Blacks fear the whites.

They couldn't envision that they could be companions with the whites (Eid et al., 2020). Later when Maya was searching for a sitter for her child she was stood up to with a White baby sitter. At this point, it was difficult for her to accept that Blacks entrusted their children with a Black sitter. Maya was constantly trained to be cautious with the Whites and not to trust them of all time. When she returned to Arkansas from California her Grandma rigorously taught her not to neglect to focus on the way that whites behave toward Blacks. We can say that Angelou has been the creator who battled the segregation what's more disparity against Black ladies.

Her most huge victory is raising the esteem of blacks through her writing. Through her life accounts, she has made her life a message to future generations. The message of the remaking of her 'self,' apparently gets broken by the consigning powers of bigot which are more of a manly abuse. The broad public appreciation and basic reaction to herself-portraying works have figured out how to overcome any barrier among life and workmanship, a stage that is essential for the upstanding presence of the Black ladies (Wiklund, 2003). Angelou's earnest portrayal of the socio-political air of the occasions that moulded her life leads to pass on how a large number of foundations affected her daily routine and the experiences of the people who lived during that particular similar timeframe (Hagen, 1997).

Her life accounts, this way figure out how to fill both her needs: to portray her own battle with the severe powers and her endurance, secondly, they fill in as the messages illustrative of the bigger battle of an African-American people group, particularly ladies against the different mistreatments. By expressing her encounters, by raising her booming voice against bigotry, sexism and inequity in her life point to the fact that Angelou has strived to disclose the agony of Black ladies (Pollard, 1984).

#### IV. ANGELOU'S TAKE ON ASSAULTS

She was one of the main lady creators who chronicled her event of undesirable intercourse. She uncovered the way how rape is utilized as an exceptional weapon, utilized by men to acquire joy and simultaneously to smother ladies. Angelou has taken the venture of binding together all individuals of colour to remain against every malevolent generalization and to challenge the constraints forced by the whites and Black men on them. Maya's genuine serenity, her feeling of respect, her honest blamelessness all is harmed by this occurrence, and on top of that, she had a place with a social class that previously resided on the edges. The highlight to be noted here is that the most ridiculously upsetting occurrence of Angelou's young life truth be told, had nothing to do with racial mistreatment; the man liable for assault was dark, and the individuals from her own race, her own relative were the ones who forced the inevitable discipline of death on him (Lupton, 1998).

This episode represents the two-fold persecution of the Blacks. Maya was a casualty of both the bigot and chauvinist society, and she endured on account of bigotry and because of male-mastery inside her race. Maya Angelou permits her pursuers to observe her transformation through various parts of her background and utilizing diverse African unique melodies and social structures such as sermons, apparition stories, strict melodies which showed the novel tongue of Afro American abstract works a long way from that of whites, likewise meshing the subject of Racism and character into her works (Guha, 2015). Maya Angelou questions numerous parts of herself; by depicting her inward contentions of being a black individual makes a new self that is absolutely free and uncaged. The start of the life account shows the dislodging of Maya Angelou (Lupton, 1999). This preface makes a climate of torment and distance of a young lady before a group. Maya's removal was brought about by her alienation from the general public on account of her tone and her motherlessness in the familial circle, as Maya begins to find herself and discover her place in the public eye, she disposes of her feeling of dislodging. Life is loaded with highs and lows and one can be presented with numerous disappointments and frustrations. However, she ought to never surrender, however rather hang on and face these disappointments and losses in request to succeed and beat them (Sharma, 2016). If scenarios are depicted to bring out an awkward feeling, it implies that they caused a profound shock in the life of an individual or a local area after all the lives of people are brimming with great and awful surprises each passing day. People have the will to work on their lives, yet they can't handle each and every part of them. Maya Angelou's adolescence is loaded with awful accidents, her first involvement in the injury was the separation of her folks, and they deserted her at an exceptionally youthful age. The primary issue in Maya's life was observing steadiness. She never felt that she has a place with any spot, or trust anybody, her reality was her sibling Bailey.

The peak of *Gather Together in My Name* happens when a suddenly caring sweetheart, Troubador Martin, who could annihilate her life, discovers that he is dependent on heroin. Before it has passed the point of no return, he shows empathy for Angelou by driving her to go with him to a San Francisco safe house where she addicts to infuse herself with heroin. While they are there, she witnesses her most recent love interest infusing him with the needle - seeing the truth of heroin-dependent direct. Teetering near the precarious edge of annihilation, Angelou had an unexpected look at the covered-up and vomited world into which she is ready to fall. Realizing her slip-up, Angelou isolates herself from him, and as the volume closes she is indeed prepared to acknowledge the demands ahead for herself as well as her child. Hence the book closes with accomplished Maya planning to get back to her mom's protection (Mendy, 2018).

#### V. BACKGROUND OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND MAYA ANGELOU'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

African American writing is the collection of writing delivered in the United States by essayists of African plummet; dark writers utilized writing to communicate their thoughts, to safeguard their theory, to depict their lives, culture, religion, and the manner in which they see the world. Among the subjects and issues investigated in African-American writings are their parts in the American culture, bigotry, subjugation, and equity. Both Black male and female journalists utilized writing as a weapon to battle against bigotry and quest for character, notwithstanding, people of colour essayists connected woman's rights with bigotry to show its effect on the African American population. For African Americans, writing was a way to oppose servitude and institutional prejudice. They additionally battled to acquire opportunity and acknowledgment as full residents of the United States. African-Americans utilized writing as a vehicle for social investigation and head-to-head conflict with segregation and racial customs.

It is necessary to grasp the significant problems of the time in order to comprehend the roots of African American literature. From Phillis Wheatley, who was the first African-American author to release her writings, to Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison to, a lot more top Black writers, African-American literature has undergone a transformative shift. Other early Afro-American writers, such as Fredrick Douglass, contributed to the advancement of Black writing. The slavery issue as well as topics relating to captives such as adapting to a new position and freeing away from confinement was by far the most prevalent themes during the apartheid era. The subject of segregation and racial conflicts prompted African Americans to utilise writings to carve out a space for themselves in society. The subject of the division was exacerbated by English explorers and tradesmen who toured the African continent. In reality, they had formed feelings of inadequacy and differentiation based on stereotypes about blackness and outward distinctions seen between two ethnic groups.

The literature studied in England at the period painted an unfavorable picture of Africans and their style of life, describing them as harsh and unattractive individuals. From the colonial time onward, African American literature includes a diverse spectrum of works. It is linked to various literary periods: The colonial era (1746-1800), the Antebellum time (1800-1865), the Post-slavery Age: with the reconstruction phase (1865-1900), the Harlem Renaissance (1900-1969), and the modern period are all covered by early African American literature (1970-present). Maya Angelous' autobiography examines the impact of racism, marginalisation, and alienation on Angelou's self-improvement, demonstrating how these forces shaped the progression of the African American individual's self-identity. An analytical approach was opted to examine the impact of segregation, oppression, and sexual assault on Black Americans. Apparently, the value of literature in moulding Maya's personality is understood through her writings (Bavanasi, 2014).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Throughout the long term, Maya Angelou has turned into a commonly recognized name in a few nations for her huge impact. Truth be told, a ton of her works have been interpreted in different dialects. Her last self-portrayal was the biography "*Mom and Me and Mom*"(2013). Later the world has seen the effect of Angelou and her work, not exclusively were her works deciphered, yet have become fundamental pieces of the scholarly curriculum. Angelou's works have likewise acquired the consideration of political pioneers all over the planet. She has spoken on different occasions and turned into a visitor speaker for occasions that advance social change and other foundation occasions. Angelou's essence in African American culture, just as adding to American Letters, will be an entrancing subject chronicled by students of history for a really long time in the future (Berlinda, 2006).

There are a couple of purposes behind this, most remarkably a few extremely open events at which Angelou addressed an enormous crowd. In the second autobiography, Maya Angelou has highlighted the theme of the family under which the racial and identity factor is found to be present (Walker, 1995). The topic of personality was set up from the start of Angelou's series of self-portrayals, with the initial lines in *Caged Bird*, which predict Angelou's self-portraying project: to compose the tale of the creating dark female subject by sharing the story of one Southern Black young lady's becoming. Angelou and other female scholars in the last part of the 1960s and mid-1970s utilized self-portrayal to reconsider methods of expounding on ladies' lives and characters in a male-ruled society (Sathiya, 2014).

As a Black lady, Angelou exhibits the development of her own social character all through her stories and has utilized her numerous jobs, manifestations, and personalities to associate the layers of mistreatment inside her own set of experiences. Angelou likewise introduces herself as a good example for African-American ladies all the more extensively by recreating the Black lady's picture through topics of individual strength and the capacity to overcome.

Throughout her work, Angelou investigates the ones who affected her development and development. The racial and identity aspects unfold gingerly to manifest the transition of Maya Angelou's life and the shades of emotions that unwind throughout "*Gather together in my name*". The suppression of Africans, the way of life, and the ideologies with which she endured and moved forward with perseverance despite the terrorizing experiences she had would have haunted her throughout her life which has brought a lot of traumatic experiences.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Angelou, M. (2009). *Gather together in my name*. Random House Trade Paperbacks.
- [2] Bavanasi, D. (2014). Maya Angelou: A Multi-faceted Poet. *Language in India*, 14(8),26-31.

- [3] Benkouider, A., & Nouara, B. (2019). *Literary Testimonials of Racism and Oppression In Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Doctoral dissertation).
- [4] Berlinda, S. (2006). *A Study of Marguerite's efforts in overcoming racism as seen in Maya Angelou's autobiography i know why the caged bird sings* (Doctoral dissertation, Petra Christian University).
- [5] Cudjoe, S. R. (1984). Maya Angelou and the autobiographical statement. *Black women writers (1950-1980): a critical evaluation*. Nova York: Anchor, 6-24.
- [6] Eid, H. K. M., Enani, M. M., & Abdel Aatty, S. S. (2020). Manifestations of Racial Discrimination as Shown in selected Poems by Maya Angelou. *Beni-Suef University International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 67-92.
- [7] Guha, S. (2015). Song of the Caged Bird: Maya Angelou's Resistance to Racism and Sexism in her poetry. *New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*, 4,48-56.
- [8] Hagen, L. B. (1997). *Heart of a woman, mind of a writer, and soul of a poet: A critical analysis of the writings of Maya Angelou*. University Press of America.
- [9] Lauret, M. (2002). *Liberating literature*. Routledge.
- [10] Lupton, M. J. (1998). *Maya Angelou: a critical companion*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- [11] Lupton, M. J. (1999). *Singing the black mother*. New York: Oxford Press.
- [12] McPherson, D. A. (1986). *Order out of chaos: the autobiographical works of Maya Angelou*. The University of Iowa.
- [13] Mendy, L. (2018). Looping the Loop in Maya Angelou's Gather Together in My Name. *Academy of Social Science Journal*, 3(1), 1103-1108.
- [14] Mohanlal, S., Sharada, B. A., Fatih, A. R., Gusain, L., Bayer, J. M., Ravichandran, S. M., ... & Thirumalai, S. (2014) Search for Survival and Identity in Maya Angelou's Gather Together in My Name., 175-182.
- [15] Nuraini, A. A. (2008). *Marguerite's Struggles against the Practices of Racial Discrimination as seen in Maya Angelou's Gather Together in My Name* (Doctoral dissertation, Thesis. Yogyakarta: Sanata Dharma University, 2008. 57).
- [16] Pollard, I. (1984). I know why the caged bird sings, Gather together in my name, Singin and swinin and gettin merry like Christmas (Book Review). *Feminist Review*, (17), 115.
- [17] Putranto, A. (2007). *Angelou's Social Criticism as Revealed in the Character of Marguerite Johnson in Angelou's Gather Together in my Name* (Doctoral Dissertation, Sanata Dharma University).
- [18] Sari, T. P. (2017). *The Struggles Of Black Woman Character In Dealing With Discrimination Gather Together In My Name By Maya Angelou*.
- [19] Sathiya, N. (2014). Search for survival and identity in Maya Angelou's Gather Together in My Name. *Language In India*, 14(2), 175-183.
- [20] Sharma, A. (2016). *Discrimination in Maya Angelou's The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*, 257-270.
- [21] Walker, Pierre A. (1995). "Racial protest, identity, words, and form in Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." *College Literature* 22.3: 91-108.
- [22] Wiklund, R. (2003). *The racial heritage: slavery and racism in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison's Sula and Beloved*. (Dissertation). Retrieved from <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:ltu:diva-53608>

**Ruth Neyah V** is an internal full-time Ph.D. scholar at Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore. She is pursuing her research in African American Diaspora literature.

**Vijayakumar M** is working as a Senior Assistant Professor in the Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore. He has presented numerous research papers at national and international conferences. His research interest includes Indian Writing in English, Postcolonial Studies, Diaspora Studies, African American Literature and Canadian Literature. He has authored a few books and several book chapters. He can be reached at vijayakumar.muthu@vit.ac.in. ORCID: 0000-0002-1079-5383.