



Major Themes of Maya Angelou's Poems

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Abstract:-

Angelou has been a prolific poet, and has published several volumes of poetry. She has experienced similar success as a poet as she did as an autobiographer. Her books center on themes such as racism, identity, family, and travel. Maya Angelou is hailed as a global renaissance woman. Angelou is celebrated poet, memoirist, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, actress, historian, filmmaker, civil right activist. Maya Angelou has presented herself as a role model for Africa. In her works Angelou has debunked the stereotypes of African-American mothers as breeders and matriarchs, and has presented them as having a creative and personally fulfilling role. She described the trauma in her first and most well-known autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. With the publication of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Angelou publicly discussed aspects of her personal life. She was respected as a spokesperson for black people and women and her works have been considered a defense of Black culture.

Key words- Black culture, slavery, discrimination, segregation, hegemony.

Introduction:-

Maya Angelou, an African-American writer who is best known for her seven autobiographies, was a prolific and successful poet. She has been called “the black woman's poet laureate” and her poems have been called the anthems of African Americans.”¹ Angelou studied and began writing poetry at a young age, and used poetry and other great literature to cope with trauma, as she described in her first and most well-known autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. With the publication of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Angelou publicly discussed aspects of her personal life. She was respected as a spokesperson for black people and women and her works have been considered a defense of Black culture. Her books center on themes such as racism, identity, family, and travel. Maya Angelou is hailed as a global renaissance woman. Angelou is a celebrated poet, memoirist, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, actress, historian, filmmaker, and civil right activist. Maya Angelou has presented herself as a role model for African. In her work Angelou has

debunked the stereotypes of African-American mothers as breeders and matriarchs, and has presented them as having a creative and personally fulfilling role. According to Nelson, Angelou's journey toward self discovery takes her from “ignorance to knowledge, from silence to speech, from racial oppression to a liberated life”²

Major Theme of her Poems:-

Angelou has been a prolific poet, and has published several volumes of poetry. She has experienced similar success as a poet as she did as an autobiographer. She began, early in her writing career of alternating the publication of an autobiography and a volume of poetry. Her first volume of poetry, Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie, published in 1971 shortly after Caged Bird, became a best-seller and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. And Still I Rise (1978), Shaker, Why Don't You Sing? (1983), Poems (1986), Now Sheba Sings the Song (1987), I Shall Not Be Moved (1990), The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou (1994), Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women (1995), Poetry

for Young People (2007) are her collection of poetry. Beginning with *Caged Bird* and ending with her final autobiography, Angelou used the metaphor of a bird, which represented Angelou's confinement resulting from racism and depression, struggling to escape its cage. The poem "Life Doesn't Frighten Me" does not ask any questions but stays in the same victorious tone with solid statements and announcements. The stanza that reveals children's racism in San Francisco where Angelou moved in her early teens and where, for the first time, she experienced mixed races schools.

That new classroom where
Boys all pull my hair
(Kissy little girls
With their hair in curls) 3

Angelou's poem becomes one of the most useful literature works to track the trace of racism in America which happened in sixteenth until nineteenth century. The poem also reflected the sentimental feeling as she is an African-American she seriously describe the ignorance of white people toward her race. In her poem Angelou try to describe racism and kind of it is institution toward Black African-American as slavery, discrimination, segregation, hegemony and prejudice and stereotype. She repeatedly mention the condition about slavery in her poem with different tone of emotion such as anger, sad, guilty, even hopeless because slavery seems too difficult to stop while at the same time it is sacrificed so many live of black African-American as she describe in the first verse of *My Guilt* poem Below:

My guilt is "slavery's chains" too long
The clang of iron falls down the years.
This brother's sold, this sister's gone,
Is bitter wax, lining my ears.
My guilt made music with tears.4

Angelou's theme of identity was established from the beginning of her autobiographies, with the opening lines in *Caged Bird* and like other female writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s she used the autobiography to reimagining ways of writing about women's lives and identities in a male-dominated society. Her original goal was to write about the lives of Black women in America, but it evolved in her

later volumes to document the ups and downs of her life. Dr. Usha comments on it, "The Female identity crisis is centered on her appearance. In a society attuned to White standards of physical beauty, Angelou felt plain and ugly and therefore inadequate. This threw her into a psychological prison from which she freed herself with great difficulty."⁵ White supremacy is one of discrimination of racism idea and put white as the superior to the non-white. The terrible part of this idea that it is applied in politic, economic and social dominates in America. Angelou mention one of the social domination as the Calling of Names in her poem. She describes how the white people start to change the calling of African-American as black as they represent their skin. We find the words in *Harlem Hopscotch* poem below:

In the air, now both feet down.
Since you are black, don't stick around.
Food is gone, the rent is due,
Curse and cry then jump two. 6

The autobiographies I Know Why The Caged Birds Sings, Gather Together In My Name, Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry Like Christmas, The Heart Of A Woman, All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes, A Song Flung Up To Heaven are a record of life of Maya that she lives. Maya has been a victim of rape at her tender age of eight. She was molested by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. This incident changes her life. When this rape was known to her family, she comes to hear news, "that Mr. Freeman was killed." After this incident Maya conceals herself in a colorless cocoon. She becomes silent. It was Mrs. Flower who makes this little girl speak. She encourages Maya to speak by telling her importance of language. Her words bring a new dawn in Maya's life. Then the words, in the form of literature become Maya's main strength. She shares her views on this unfavorable and disgusting vice in her poem 'Men.' Reviewer Daisy Aldan of *World Literature Today* criticized Angelou for harboring "a fanatic hostility expressed toward all white people."⁷ But Angelou promoted the importance of hard work, a common theme

in slave narratives, throughout all her autobiographies, in order to break the African-American stereotype of laziness. Scholar Yolanda Manora stating that, “Angelou broke stereotypes of African-American women by describing these images and stereotypes, and then disproving them, which set the stage for Angelou's identity development in her later autobiographies.”⁸ Survival is something that has always attracted Angelou. She says, “All my work, my life, everything is about survival”, Maya Angelou once declared, “But not just bare, awful, plodding survival. Survival with some style, with faith”⁹ A prolific writer, Maya Angelou's poetry conveys a message of “survival for African-American people to rise above poverty, prejudice and lack of power.”¹⁰ She had been victimized of the harsh and cruel treatment of slavery and racism. Her poems are the voice of her race.

Her pride and conformity have often met with scornful looks and envy from the white people who regarded her behavior as being threatening and dangerous. Further in the poem “Weekend Glory” she says:

Folks write about me.

They just can't see
how I work all week
at the factory.¹¹

The whole America has seen the standards of beauty in fairy-like Shirley Temple who has been adored by both men and women. In the poem “Let`s Majeste” Angelou poses a question that bothers many black women in America,

“and when the rousing kiss is given
why must it always be a fairy, and
only just a Prince”.¹²

Angelou`s reinvention of the African-American woman is strongly connected with the idea of physical beauty that is understood by white American women as being one of the best virtues. Maya Angelou describes the feelings of a black girl in this way:

“When in disgrace with fortune and men`s
eyes

I all alone be weep my outcast state

And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless
cries” (“Angelou`s fight - with poetry”).¹³
The notion that black is evil embedded in

the earlier writings has been erased by the proclamation “black is beautiful” that miraculously started to change the idea that only white women can be beautiful.

Conclusion:-

Maya Angelou's poems deal with the identity of female as well as identity of Afro-American people who were colonized by Americans. After colonization they had been the victim of racism. Thus their identity was not established even as a human being. They were treated first as slaves then as Blacks. The identity of Afro-American woman was totally different from Afro-American males. Afro-American woman was double-colonized, one because of slavery, other because of Black male. They crave for their identity, that identity which is their own, not given by cultural phenomenon. After doing household works, these women also work outside for their survival. They sacrificed their children's upbringing, as they were helpless to nourish their master's children. Black males were forced to handover their women to white males to satisfy their carnal hunger. This pathetic condition of female as well as black male is described clearly by Maya Angelou in her poems.

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