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### **PERSPECTIVE OF RACISM IN MAYA ANGELOU'S NOVEL 'I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS'**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with Angelou's autobiography 'I know why the caged bird sings'. In this piece, Angelou tries to focus on the ill-treatment against black women in a racially discriminated society. Though it is an autobiography the author tries to universalize the incidents which shows the reality of black people and their sufferings in the hands of whites. The whole book discusses the desire and sufferings of Maya to attain an identity in the discriminated world. The term 'Racism' is often used in a loose and unreflective way to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or 'people' toward another and the actions resulting from such attitudes. But sometimes the antipathy of one group towards another is expressed and acted upon with a single-mindedness and brutality that go far beyond the group-centered prejudice and snobbery that seem to constitute an almost universal human failing. Maya Angelou is one of the renowned authors of African-American literature who has constructed her writing around racism and discrimination of black women in the society. Though the world has developed in many areas still it is lacking in the areas of racism and independence of an individual in the society.

#### **KEY WORDS:**

Racism, Gender discrimination, Identity, Individuality

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Racism can be defined as: a way of thinking that considers a group's unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct casual way to psychological or intellectual characteristics and which on this basis distinguishes between superior and inferior racial group.

The word 'Race' was first used in 1508 in a poem by William Dunbar in English language and in the seventeenth and eighteenth century it remained as literary word denoting the class of persons or things. In late eighteenth century people were divided based on their colour and physical features

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especially black Africans for their black colour and for being as a slave to Europeans.

Angelou has brilliantly with the help of autobiography has projected the richness and vitality of the southern black and the sense of community that persists with poverty and racial prejudice through the image of a black girl child in the Arkansas of the 1930's in 'I know why the caged bird sings'. The caged bird is structured into episodes like short stories though not in chronological order. Her significance as an autobiographer rests upon the narration of her life as a human being and as black American women in the twentieth century. She makes the readers realize the suffering of black people especially of a black girl, demonstrating the pains, who has lived through varied and vigorous lives with quintessential experiences of their race and culture. Angelou introduces the world which is encircled with humiliation, displacement, violation, and loss. 'The less you say to white folks (or even Po white trash) the better'. The black has to accept the insults of the whites and through the spiritual and emotional manner, the whites tried to debase the blacks and their existence.

A girl normally gets suppressed in the hands of racial and gender discrimination but the case of the black girl is even worse than that. They are self-critical and the world's experiences trap them behind the rust bars of the society. Being born black makes them liable in the society which is ruled by the whites and they regret being black.

The scene in her graduation 1940 at Lafayette country training school, where the English Mr Edward Donleavy insults the negro by comparing them with the white school and the approving 'Amens' from her elders makes her worse. She feels bad to be a Negro: 'it was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my colour with no chance of defence. We should all be dead. I thought I should like to see us all dead, one on top of the other'. Her childhood experience leaves a mark in her life which is carried until the end of the novel. After the valedictory address in her school, Maya takes the first step toward the social development in stamps, Arkansas. The text reduces the Negro to a sense of impotence and nothingness. This is the internal 'rust' which threatens the personhood of the black people. This creates a homicidal within the people and pushes them to the brink of spiritual waste and physical destruction.

According to Angelou to be black and female is faced with the special quality of violence and violation. This comes in light when Maya goes to live with her mother and is subsequently raped by her mother's boyfriend. After this incident, she despairs into herself but due to her strong will she comes back from the despair and works functionally in a productive manner in the society. The problem of liberation among Afro-American is both internal and external and the internal probing is shown in this novel. In the life of black people, the villain is the society, which reduces men to impotence, women to whoredom and children to their father's lust and impotence. As a victim of the racial creed society, Maya becomes pregnant at the age of sixteen without any financial or emotional maturity to take care of a child. In spite of the brutality and violence in the stamps, the beauty of life and the religious life continues to prevail in the black community. In the case of the black woman, it demonstrates the pain which growth and awareness demand. 'Without willing it, I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware. And the worst part of my awareness was that I didn't know that I was aware of.'

The novel is about blackness, youth and white American society. The miracle is that out of this war emerges a being, who is capable of believing her worth and capacity. The black girl's innocence and

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confidence, results in a successful black woman lending the narrative tension, drama and force. Some of the optimistic incidents in the novel are the optimistic mornings when black cotton pickers meet at the store and their despairing evening return from the fields. She also remembers hiding her uncle Willie in a vegetable bin, when a sheriff warns 'a crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys will be coming over later'. She also recalls an incident when some white girls insult momma, who keeps her dignity but says nothing. The novel is full of insights into the American rural black community in the 1930's and its worldview. She reveals her childhood dreams of getting up white, envying the 'good' hair girl and paranoia for the white throughout her life and racism in American society. The condition of the black woman which Angelou points out 'the black woman in the south who raises sons, grandsons, and nephews had her heartstrings tied to a hanging nose'. The tradition of naming the child was a ritual in the Afro-American but due to racism, slavery in the master-servant relationship, black people forget their names and identity. Though the names have a significant meaning in Afro-American tradition everything comes to nothingness in the white society.

The title 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' refers the conditions of the black women and how their soul is bruised black and blue by hitting the bars of the cage to attain freedom. Black man fights for his impotency and masculinity in the world. In the same way, a black woman fights for the beauty and freedom of herself against the racially discriminated society.

In this novel Angelou quests for the black womanhood and a place where a child no longer asks for self-consciousness "what you looking at me for?" and where a woman can declare confidently, "I am a beautiful black woman".

The novel 'I know why the caged bird sings' resembles like Richard Wright's 'Black boy' in many ways. The small rural setting of the town, where children are sent to their relatives house. Maya and her brother are forced to attend the church where they amuse themselves by making humorous comments over the members of congregation; the preacher comes to dinner and eats all the chicken; is a constant friction between the blacks and whites; the hypocritical speeches of the superintendent in their segregated school, the refusal of the white dentist to fix her teeth after her grandmother had salvaged his business; her brother helps fish out a decomposed negro body out of the pond while whites stand around and tell malicious jokes; the local sheriff gives them casual warnings whenever the Klan is about to go on rampage; and finally, she migrates to a Northern city.

The novel demands an individual attention from the readers with the voices of other females in the 19th and 20th century. Writers like Virginia Woolf, George Sand and Forugh of soaring, if given freedom to do so and their writings show their ability to do so. The text patterns out the Angelou's movement from innocence to awareness, from childhood to an adolescent, which is incorporated with the contents of the society, from which she tries to liberate. As she moves through the text she faces the evils of the society and faces the challenges to keep herself up stand in the white society. She withstands all the discrimination, which at last makes her free bird. She has kept a distinct image of herself as a woman, lover, mother, writer, performer and political activist. She had the courage to go back to her country in spite of its cruel slavery and racial hatred.

Like Jane Austen, Angelou also shares the world she knows in her way, the live persons of Arkansas, her adored brother; lame uncle Willie; Mrs. Flowers, the town's black aristocrat, her love for literature (Shakespeare, even though he was white) and women in English novels, who drink tea and walk across the moors. With the support of her religious grandmother and her mother, she recovers her

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sense of sexual life and at last fights with the white authority to become the first black woman conductor of the San Francisco street cars.

Racism had a so much effect on the society that even the white doctors were reluctant to touch and treat the blacks which is perfectly shown in the novel when Maya's grandmother took Maya to the white dentist. Though the black community was suffering, Maya's grandmother Mrs Henderson took care of her crippled son and grandchildren. She also lent money to the community in their needs but when she takes Maya to the dentist to whom she helped by lending money, he refuses to treat her.

White dentist: Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's.

Annie: I wouldn't press on you like this for myself but I can't take no. not for my grandbaby. When you come to borrow my money you didn't have to beg. You asked me, and I lent it. Now, it wasn't my policy. I ain't no moneylender, but you stood to lose this building and I tried to help you out.'

By presenting these characters, Angelou tries to present the power of black women in the discriminated white society and the position of women in the community. Her woman characters are more firm than men characters. Vivian Baxter is the one of the powerful characters whom Angelou presents in her novel. Baxter points a line from Zora Neale Hurston's novel 'the black woman is the mule of the world', but Vivian insisted that not one ebon sister has to accept that warrant'. This shows that the Angelou's women world is different from the Zora Neale Hurston's. Stamps Arkansas in 1930 was a place where a black child could not grow up freely intellectual or socially potential, a region where many of the black people have sacrificed their lives and bright dreams for the future generation. But in this region, we can see Angelou's grandmother who stood up as a powerful woman whom the Angelou has admired and got inspired. But the racial prejudice in stamps even defeats her powerful grandmother in spite of her being a resilient character in the stamps.

'It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of blackness'.

James Baldwin marked Angelou's 'I know why the caged bird sings' as 'the beginning of a new era in the minds and hearts of all black men and women, liberating the reader into life simply because Maya Angelou confronts her own life with such moving wonder, such a luminous dignity'. Maya Angelou was one of the few writers who achieved a literary breakthrough. The uniqueness of her novel is that it is readily appreciated than analysed and stated. David Levering Lewis feels that 'it is a melding of unconcerned honesty, consummate craft and perfect descriptive pitch, yielding a rare compound of great emotional force and authenticity, undiluted by polemic'.

In an interview with George Goodman (9) Angelou said 'the real problem in America is between black men and white men. Both see themselves as warriors. Black men talk about change when what they really mean is the exchange. They want to take over the position of power white men have... now I am going to do what I can to help clear the air in black America because as I see it, that's what needs to be done. I am going to write in caged bird about all these black men with their fists balled up who talk about nation –building time and then go home to rape their nieces and step-daughters and all the little teenage girls who don't know beans about life. I am going to tell it because rape and incest are rife in the black community'.

Angelou asserts that men dominate women by molestation and race and sex have become the major cause of the black women community. It has become a political act to get dominance over women. By narrating the rape in her autobiography Angelou tries to show the reality of black

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community where race is not only the problem but gender domination within the community.

As a result, she has become the active speaker of second-wave feminism. She asserts that: '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 the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and black lack of power. The fact is that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance'. (Caged bird 272)

The obstacles in Maya's life gave her the power to conquer the racial dominated world. Some incidents in her life gave her courage to face the racial society. First, she drives her father's car in mountains at night gives her confidence to decide her destiny. Second the stay in the junkyard for a month after getting stabbed by her father's girlfriend. She tries to live without an adult support and experience the multi-racial community. Third her aim of working in the railways encourages her self-esteem at the age of 16. This episode shows the struggle and achievement of a black girl who at last overcomes racial discrimination independently.

Angelou curses herself as the victim of death and violence. She claims that 'I had sold myself to the devil and there could be no escape' (caged bird 70). This shows her self-rejection, inferiority complex of her psyche. Freeman's abuse forces her to feel the trap of death and she feels that she is dead physically and is again banished to stamps. But on her graduation, she says that 'somewhere in my fatalism I had expected to die, accidentally, and never have the chance to walk up the stairs in the auditorium and gracefully receive my hard-earned diploma out of God's mercifully bosom I had won reprieve'. (Caged bird 136)

Angelou's novel shows the female consciousness, intersecting between race, gender and class. Her urge for identity is displaced in the novel from the beginning. The novel not only presents the life of Angelou but also the African-American tradition and culture.

### **CONCLUSION**

Hence we can see that this piece of writing broadly projects the sufferings of the black woman in the racial discriminated society. And this work also encourages women to face the obstacle of the society and achieve their dreams as the character Maya wins the post of being the first lady conductor in America. Critics associate Maya Angelou's novels with New criticism or Structuralism. They try to analysis whether Angelou's protagonist Maya's life is personal or universal like the rape of Maya by her mother's boyfriend, the scene of 'Po white trash' girls in Angelou's grandmother's store, her one month stay in the junkyard, the visit to dentist etc. Maya uses all these incidents to show the oppression of racial discrimination in America. Through the life of Maya we can see the social condition of black woman in the society'. Angelou's autobiographies will continue to inspire the present generation writers to express their opinions on Individuality and Identity without any hindrance.

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