

Educating the Learner with the generic terrain of Life Writing : A Study of the Marginalised Female Self in the works of Maya Angelou

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This research paper situates the relevance of educating the learner with the study of life writing to portray the narrative self in the autobiographical writing of Maya Angelou. The autobiographical pieces as a feminography echo the history, culture and ethical identity of the woman who breaks the barriers of gender discrimination based on class, identity, ethnicity and religion. The unravelling of the female self by Maya Angelou is a self-narrative in which she recalls the injustices meted out to her and describes how power affects social injustice and political inequity. Maya Angelou voices the issues of race, misogyny and sexuality by rebelling against structural inequality to enhance the quality of the lives of women so that all women who combat multiple forms of oppression can raise their voices to narrate the female self. The voices in the feminography are a narration of the female self and the challenges that are faced and hurdles overcome by a marginalised woman. The exploration of the African American identities against racial prejudices to reconstruct the female cultural identity and image of not just the black woman, but the authentic self of every woman is to achieve social justice and gender justice as the theme of her feminography. These life stories of Maya Angelou are a candid revelation and echo the hardships of women who fear to echo these battles due to patriarchal suppression, societal oppression and familial domestication.

The generic terrain of life writing or autobiographical writing as the expository narrative to voice the tale of the female self as a self-narrative in the form of diaries, letters, memories and narration of autobiographies by women is a genre that was once masculinist. Feminography redefined the genre by articulating the self-representation of women as “technologies of autobiography”. Thereby the traditional official autobiography positioned subjectivity by fashioning a body of writing that was invisible and voiceless. Female issues of gender, race, colour, sexuality and textuality exhumed the socio-political, emotional, aesthetic, domestic, intellectual accounts of the marginalised. The articulation of their lives by the marginalised women of colour was redeeming for the woman writer and many women readers who had gone through similar experiences. The sojourn of Maya Angelou from struggle to self-esteem sketches the journey of many an African-American woman as she articulates the silence of the female self through the rhetoric of self-representation. Maya Angelou’s self-writing challenges the gender ideologies and recognises how the institution of patriarchy has fictionalised women in the androcentric tradition and culture. The unheard voices of a saga of suffering resound the narration of the female self in the realms of feminography and unravels memoirs in the archives of a woman’s life as is perceived in her celebrated works.

Feminist history and the struggles of women have been debated ever since the beginning of time. Ever since the first wave feminism from the period of 1830, and thereafter the second, third, fourth and five wave feminisms to the present day, the

subjugation of women, coercion of womenfolk being overthrown by male domination, liberation from oppressive constraints of sex, requirement for self-expression and autonomy has been the subject of debate. The resurgence of women's movements in the twentieth century witness skirmishes by women for equality in the domestic households, in the family, sexuality and work. Yet this later changed for the better with focus on empowerment, intersectionality and gender justice. In course of time, women being the solutions to problems and not the reasons for being victimised were raised and women excelled in all arenas and were on par and very often superior to men in their contributions to balancing home, work and society. Women were to lead the society, in economics, culture, media and sustainability with resolved feminist self-determination. This would not have been possible without gynocriticism or the works of women writers all over the globe. Women autobiographies, poems, tales and fiction by women created a literature "for women, by women, of women". From the margins, the voice of the subaltern and unheard tales of gender oppression laid bare the atrocities against women and the subordination of women as the other. Questioning maleness as "the standard and universal" and femaleness as "what maleness is not" was questioned by women writers and the concept of otherness fiercely interrogated gender equality. The echoes of a number of women writers recounted the apprehensions of the feminine self. Maya Angelou was yet another writer who liberated herself through her poetic cannon and autobiographically confessional writing. As a prolific poet and poet laureate, she poured her woes through literary writing in the first-person narrative and bravely voiced the angst and disquiet that she was subject to. Thus, autobiography was elevated to a higher art form as she explored the themes of racism, identity and resilience in relation to the life and struggles of a woman. The need for women to unmute themselves to give expression to the female voice, to gather strength from the sisterhood of feminist collectives and retrieve female experience through feminography as a tool of empowerment has quizzed the outdated markers of feminine identity of sexual identity, marriage, motherhood, postpartum depression and adaptation in the family and society as a female-dominated discourse that encapsulates women to restructure the self. This is done by narrating their tales and lived experiences as feminist discourses and has unfastened newer zones for cohorts of women to tread into this new genre of life narration where they celebrate women as the heroes or sheroes of their lives.

As a celebrated memoirist, poet, essayist and autobiographer, and also as an artist, singer, actress, composer and professional, she vented the grief and distress of her sentiments and described the ups and downs of her tragic childhood and her personal life. Her autobiographies talk of her involvements as a civil rights activist, supper club chanteuse, night club performer and spokesperson for women. Her redolent autobiography recalls the calamitous marriage of her parents, their moving to their grandmother's home and how she was sexually abused and raped by her mother's boyfriend, Freeman. She confided in her brother and her uncles murdered him in front of her and she became dumb for five years. She supposed that her voice killed him and felt she would never speak again as this voice was the voice that killed someone. Yet these traumatic years of silence sharpened her observation, memory, love of books and literature and in 1969, she wrote the evocative Autobiography, *I know why the Caged Bird Sings*. She is reminiscent of memories in *Gather Together in My Name*, the second autobiography (1974), *Swinging and Swingin and Getting Merry like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) and more. Her poems, cook books, autobiographies and apologetic writing have been a prodigious influence

in the realms of African American writing. and pronounced her feelings against racism and sexism. Her seventh volume of autobiography published in 2013 as *Mom, Me and Mom* focusses on her relationship with her mother. *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986) dialogues of her search for her tribe in Ghana. She encountered countless defeats but overcomes defeat with faith, grace and hope. A song *Flung up to Heaven* (2002) and *Mom, Me and Mom* (2013) are the self-narratives of a memoirist to black feminist writing.

The genre of African American autobiography is a self-revelation of her personal and political life as she unlocks her life to resound her life and the lives of women who have also been subject to indescribable anguish and torment. Her essays in *Letters to my daughter* (2008) are full of pathos, misery and irony. She critiques the themes of premarital cohabitation, pornography and lesbianism. She echoes political protest, identity and racism in a direct voice and a structured form using dialogue and characterisation to elevate autobiography to a higher art form. Her incredible resilience is echoed in the theme of desperation of parents, portrayal of sexual assault and sexual trauma of witnessing the murder of the one who abused her. Her gratitude to Mrs Bertha Flowers, the teacher who instilled in her courage to regain her voice is a self-expression of thankfulness. The theme of discrimination and black white encounters and her discourse on issues of black identity are satiric. She disrupts the stereotypes of oppression and suppression of blacks and her works read like slave narratives. The feminography harps on the leitmotif of distrust, but she converts this into ceaseless courage and leadership and as a self-made woman voyages from helplessness to indignation. The metaphor of a bird struggling to escape from the cage is in itself a haunting autobiography. Her chronicles sightsee the theme of relationships, the power structures of the whites, the skirmishes of the blacks and the need for social justice. The theme of the recognition of identity is voiced in her discussion of Ghana as “the centre of African Cultural Renaissance”. The female narrative self-voices the strand of chronic displacement, the woes of the black woman in a male dominated world, her sorrow against racial prejudices and the question of survival of an African American woman in a white society.

The feminography dwells on social and cultural identity and attempts to recreate the image of the strong black woman. She debunks the mother stereotype as a nurturer, provider, care taker or matriarch and recollects her Southern black girlhood and childhood memories to integrate the lives of the marginalised through the lens of her life and experiences. The self-narrative, is totally female as she narrates the life of the black woman, the intimate family, concerns of kinship, mother child relationship, the trauma and strength of single motherhood and more. The hardships of child care, financial burdens, lack of economic security, need for survival and being treated as inferior or subordinated are odds she had to combat. Thus, the feminography creates an authentic self as the female narrative self-fights for social justice to escape the emotions of pain, sorrow, rebellion and love. Thus, the theme of influx, sojourn and departure is in search of a quest for achievement through her traumatic expedition of childhood, adolescence adulthood and old age. The female self-accepts the humiliation of her early childhood due to issues of gender, race and class and refurbishes the search for identity as she crafts the genre of feminography and autobiographical narrative to portray the strength of the black woman as “black is beautiful”. Inorder to tightly craft the genre of feminography by knitting the narrative of the female self, she echoes perpetual truths to voice the glorification of the black

woman, the marginalised women and womanhood. Thus the renowned and venerated African American poet who is a literary icon and prolific writer voices the story of her life as the sojourn of many a black African American woman who regains self esteem and confidence to fight the socio-political climate of the times. Through the genre of the female life writing about the self and through the genre of feminography, she raises questions of female jurisprudence. The pathos of the experiences of a woman in the refrain of the selfhood of a woman, is articulated as a brilliant autobiographical narrative where all caged birds long to fly in music towards freedom, in a search for the self to emerge as a stronger and more stoic women who celebrate their destiny with a deification of womanhood for perpetuity.

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