

Racial Discrimination and Gender Inequality In Maya Angelou's *The Heart Of A Woman*: A Social Study

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Abstract

Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman* focuses on adulthood and motherhood of her life. She is a renowned African American autobiographer of six series of her biographical volumes. This study mainly explores the subjects of racial discrimination, gender inequality, political upheavals, black womanhood, racial brutality, motherhood and struggle for survival in the contemporary African American society. Angelou has meticulously documented African American women's experiences from the earliest stages of the Civil Rights Movement to the present. The majority of Maya Angelou's writings exhibit resistance to racism and gender injustice. Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman* starts with a big change as she moves to Los Angeles with her son, Guy. With this move, she is starting a new chapter in her life, one that is full of opportunity and change. Angelou immediately gets active in the arts after immersing herself in the thriving cultural landscape of Los Angeles. During this time, Maya's growing involvement in the civil rights movement began to define her life. While living through the exciting and chaotic 1960s, she involved herself in the fight against racial discrimination and the quest for social justice. Her unwavering efforts to mobilize, coordinate, and promote African Americans' rights demonstrated her dedication to change. Maya had a variety of roles throughout this time. She continually balanced her roles as a mother, an artist, a scholar, and an activist. Her own encounters with racism and discrimination stoked her fervor and genuineness for the cause, establishing her as a believable and approachable change agent.

Keywords: Black womanhood, Racial discrimination, Gender inequality, Social oppression, Social injustice.

Introduction

Marguerite Ann Johnson (1928–2014), better known by her stage name, Maya Angelou, was a well-known poetess, memoirist, and prolific writer in the history of African American literature. She is an African American woman writer who challenges white people's misconceptions and prejudices about black women. She shows how strong and independent black women can be, even in the face of the misconception that they are less intelligent and less attractive than white people. Despite this, Angelou challenges the false stereotype that black women are weak and ugly. Her poems portray strong, confident black women who can stand up for their rights and are, at the very least, on par with white women. Gender and racial issues will continue to be contentious until women everywhere obtain their fundamental rights. Women continue to struggle and fight against racial and gender inequality, even though their freedom is generally greater than those of women in poverty-stricken countries. The term "feminism" is more expansive than the general public realizes.

The goal of feminists is to provide women with social fairness. This restoration can occur on all levels physical, psychological, political, economic, and, in the end, social. Feminists aim to establish a society that treats men and women equally. Scholars have examined Maya Angelou's poetry from a number of perspectives. Black women's discrimination and suffering are two of the frequently discussed subjects (Munawaroh and Paturohmah, 53). However, they have portrayed black power as "the way to survive in society" (2013, 94). Other researchers, like Liliek Soelistyo Krisna and Sylvania Krisna, have focused on black empowerment in Angelou's chosen poems. Angelou's poetry highlights both the stereotypes of black women imposed by white people and their strength, making multiracial-feminist theory a suitable choice in terms of approach. The 1970s saw the rise of multiracial feminism, led by American women of colour.

This movement linked women's justice to the need to examine how race functions as a powerful factor in relation to gender inequality and other types of repression. Multiracial feminism, which challenges the idea that all women come from the same origins, is at the forefront of the conversation about racism, colonialism, imperialism, and sexism, which undermines the idea of gender unity in modern feminism. Ethnic stratification is essential to multiracial feminists' idea of gender oppression. Multiracial feminists—also referred to as feminists from the Third World—establish transnational, cultural, and multicultural alliances founded on a joint fight against the oppression of gender, race, and class as a result of their recognition that cultures, genders, and nations are fluid (Zinn and Dill, 1996).

Reading Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*, the reader gets the impression that the story is about the struggle against men's power. As an activist, she fought against racial conflicts, which made black women's problems more complicated

and made most of them unwilling to move forward and victimise patriarchal beliefs. In order to empower herself to overcome several challenges, Angelou explores her personal life experiences. During her early years, Maya Angelou endured several forms of oppression. Her struggles began when she and her brother moved out from under their parents' roof. Their grandmother raised them in Arkansas, where she faced significant racial prejudice. Her mother's lover sexually assaulted her when she was eight years old. She later became involved with a boy and got pregnant, but she decided to raise the fatherless child on her own and had a lot of painful experiences. In her thirties, she dealt with more complex situations involving political unrest, racism, economic hardships, and gender norms.

Maya frequently participated in black Americans' fight for recognition as equals in society. Maya, a member of the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH), was present when white people shot and killed a man. She assumed a major position in an assembly to demonstrate the strength of black people. She fearlessly told the crowd on the assembly day, "Nothing could please the whites more than to have a reason to shoot down innocent black folks." Refrain from giving them pleasure. She confidently presented her perspective to the public, taking the lead in this political matter and expressed her ideas in her writing. She has focused a lot of attention on political life and has also made a greater political contribution.

During her political path, she encountered notable individuals such as Billie Holiday, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X. These historical figures shared her life in a variety of ways. Bayard Rustin later recognized Maya's assistance in planning a benefit cabaret, leading to her appointment as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organiser. The arrangement to present a cultural presentation under the moniker "The Blacks" marked a turning point in her life. She departed New York, leaving behind her bail bondsman Thomas Allen, whom she intended to marry, and was swept off her feet by the South African independence warrior Vasumzi Make. Her beauty and craftsmanship, along with her compassion for the black community, captivated him, while his perseverance and commitment to his people moved Maya. He spoke on the difficulties faced by Africans as white people tried to deny them their own nation.

Make also wanted and valued Maya's son, who was exceptionally gifted, clever, and manly. When she did finally agree to his proposal, she married him and took on the name Maya Angelou Make. He brought her to London, then Cairo. Maya, who was longing for parental love as a child, was delighted that the boy had received it from him. He cheated on her, which eventually caused the marriage to fail. Due to financial difficulties, Make made the decision that Maya should work so that she could support the family. David DuBois, Vusumzi Make's friend and coworker at the Arab Observer journal, assisted in hiring her shortly after. This study shows, how the 20th-century African-American lady Maya Angelou, influenced numerous generations of African Americans. Her autobiographies and poems intelligently and forcefully address racial and gender empowerment. She possessed this empowerment from an early age, and it followed her throughout her life. It's also a truth that, unlike Maya Angelou, most people don't understand their gender and race at such a young age. She was acutely aware of her "undeserved...relegation to second-class citizenship" and the severe marginalization she faced in both gender and ethnicity (Walker 93).

Racial and gendered identities appear to be major themes that Angelou addressed when talking about race and identity in *The Heart of a Woman*. Her experience living in an experimental community with an anonymous man is the first chapter of this book (*The Heart of a Woman* 9). But according to Hilton Als, a writer for *The New Yorker*, Maya Angelou "unwittingly reveals her own shortcomings" in her description of Holiday. Als made it quite evident that Holiday believed she was a great woman—not for singing, but for writing. It's surprising that Als came to the conclusion that Holiday lacked identity and was only "moderately talented" (Als). In reality, Maya Angelou's evaluation of Holiday compelled Als to make this judgment. Maya Angelou described Holiday as an ordinary person with a language that was a "mixture of vulgarity and mockery" (Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, 11). According to Dolly McPherson, Angelou joined the political movement for her own identity and rose to fame in her own culture (93). Angelou's participation in the establishment of "The Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage" demonstrated her greater involvement in political affairs compared to her work in show business (*The Heart of a Woman*, 143). The primary focus of Maya Angelou's serial autobiographies is the voice of the African American community, particularly African American women. She describes her marginalized existence and repressed consciousness, especially in the fourth volume, *The Heart of a Woman*. Because of this recording, she develops a politicized consciousness and self-identity. Her autobiographies serve as a form of protest against those who would not allow black Americans to live fully. African Americans, viewed as second-class citizens and particularly treated poorly against women, thrust the reader into an oppressive world. Readers may get a strange impression from Maya's autobiographical works based on her own experience. Marxist-Communist Antonio Gramsci coined the term "subaltern" to describe any individual or group of lower status and station, regardless of their color, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religious beliefs. In this instance, Maya Angelou meets Gramsci's criteria. Due to racism, she struggles to live and gain her identity as a black community member.

Early in Maya Angelou's life, racism was a major problem in South America; she said that it "was not only homicidal but also suicidal" (p. 245). They were under pressure to demonstrate to the rest of the world that they were on par with everyone else, so they began enticing people from all over the world to come see them in an effort to establish their identity. Maya begins this chapter by remembering Althea Gibson, who went on to become the first black woman to win the US Open tennis singles championship. In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayathri Chakravarty Spivak

claims that subaltern people are unable to communicate their own modes of knowing (thinking, reasoning, and language) and are forced to express their non-Western understanding of colonial existence in a way that is consistent with Western worldviews. Therefore, it is evident from Maya's voyage that black people (also known as subalterns) find it extremely difficult to survive in a white land. In order for them to speak up and demand what they need for their well-being, they require sound direction, capable leadership, financial prosperity, etc.

Throughout this poem, Maya never gives up on her ability to establish herself as a formidable creation, despite the existential issues she has seen in contemporary America. This phase starts when Maya moves to New York without her son, Guy. She works as a singer and dancer in nightclubs, earning money to avoid financial instability, and devotes herself to performing, writing poetry, essays, and other creative endeavours. In the novel's early scenes, Guy, Maya's son, was the victim of racial discrimination. They accused him of using derogatory language in front of some girls on the school bus. When Maya visited the school to discuss the issue, she found herself confronted with prejudice. Guy's instructors portrayed him in a negative light: "We do not allow Negro boys to use foul language in front of our girls." (p. 22)

This autobiographies main theme is motherhood. We can divide the intricacies of the concept into three distinct problems: Maya's relationship with Guy, Vivian's relationship with Maya, and Maya's relationship with herself. She improves her ability to care for her son Guy, inquires about his thoughts, and expresses concerns about his development. The fifth chapter, which centers around the Brooklyn gang known as the Savages, serves as the best illustration of this volume, as Angelou discusses her struggles with motherhood. The fact that Angelou is in Chicago for a singing engagement when Guy gets into trouble with the gang serves to emphasise it. While she is away, John Killens, who is keeping watch over him, calls her from Brooklyn to inform her about the situation. John Killen's voice pinned me down like a spike. "Some trouble has occurred" (92). Maya was very concerned about her son Guy, which is evident in her affection for him when she learns about the dangerous group.

"The boys are a gang called the Savages. They killed a boy last month, and as he lay in the funeral home, the Savages went in and stabbed the body thirtyfive times." (p. 96)

Angelou learns from these and other interactions with Guy that she is powerless to stop her own childhood from being perpetually displaced in her son's existence. African-American emancipation is the primary goal of Angelou's autobiographical books, and these examples demonstrate to the public that black children in America were not living safe and secure lives. They were oppressed by the whites. "Whether we come from New York City or South or from the West Indies, the black people are equally oppressed." (p. 182)

Guy gets into a car accident near the end of this volume and suffers major injuries. In a shortened, agonist piece of autobiography, Angelou looks into the face of her son, who is unconscious. She was worried about him, and she had received some money from her mother to help with Guy's medical expenses. The fourth volume makes it quite clear that black people, especially young women and children, never felt safe. Maya therefore sees marriage as the solution to her own sense of dislocation and has high expectations for herself and her potential partners. Maya has no choice but to get married in order to ensure her financial stability and security. As she meets black South African liberation fighter Vusumzi Make while in New York, she hopes that he will give her the same kind of home security that she had anticipated would grow their relationship: "Vus said we would marry in Oxford, such a pretty little town." However, Maya's marriage did not succeed (p. 164).

This autobiography tells the story of Maya's struggle in life and her journey into politics with her son Guy. One of the most notable examples in this volume is her description of meeting Martin Luther King Jr. at the SCLC office, when she expresses enthusiasm for working with the political organizer. The economy is the main issue facing these leaders, notwithstanding the numerous proposals they have developed to overcome prejudice. To prepare for the anti-racism demonstration, they want additional funding. In order to fortify herself against racism and fascism, Maya allied herself with Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, Elijah Muhammad, Kwame Nkrumah, and others. "Martin Luther King was sacred and fund-raising was my calling" (p. 121).

Malcolm X argued that white people were acting like devils and advocated for black people's independence. He inspired black people to revolt with his stirring comments, "Every person under the sound of my voice is a soldier. You are either fighting for your freedom or betraying the fight for freedom or enlisted in the army to deny somebody else's freedom" (p.179)

Maya and her group began performing in various settings, such as clubs, singing songs, acting out plays, and dancing, in order to help promote economic prosperity. Her crew invited Maya to write a play about Martin Luther King.

"They wanted me to produce another revue. They wanted me to write a play about Martin Luther King and the struggle." (p. 106)

However, Maya tragically describes the death of Lumumba, a black activist and liberation fighter, in Chapter Eleven, which highlights the height of racism at the time. CAWAH has played a significant role in the protest against white dominance. "We are members of CAWAH. Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage. We have learned that our brother, Lumumba, has been killed in the Congo." (p. 186)

Meanwhile, with the assistance of her buddy David, Maya was able to secure a position as a journalist and reporter for the Cairo-based news publication Arab Observer magazine, which has a worldwide readership. In her opinion, her work

may benefit both her personal life and the protests. Guy, her son, also found a part-time job. “Guy had found a part-time job in a bakery nearby, and dawns found him showering and dressing...” (p. 78)

Guy, a University of Ghana student, is moving into a dorm at the conclusion of this volume, *The Heart of a Woman*. Just Angelou is included in the final two paragraphs: I closed the door and held my breath. Waiting for the wave of emotion to surge over me, knock me down, take my breath away. Nothing happened. I didn’t feel bereft or desolate I didn’t feel lonely or abandoned. I sat down, still waiting. The first thought that came to me, perfectly formed and promising, was “At last, I’ll be able to eat the whole breast of a roast chicken by myself. (p. 336)

Angelou is waiting for something bad to happen to her, just like she imagined Guy’s being stolen or hit by a bus earlier. But she was able to handle it by herself, showing that she is a strong woman.

For instance, the autobiography *The Heart of a Woman* used common literary methods such as the narrative point of view and the first-person point of view. Literary methods can explore major themes like marriage, motherhood, the search for identity, and racial discrimination. She has used conversation in a new way, adding a twist and writing from the first-person point of view. The conversation provided readers with a genuine sense of immersion and experience. Maya wants people to understand what she’s trying to say. She entices people with her clever writing style and the way she tells stories that feel both true and artistic.

Conclusion

This conclusion sums up her writing, Angelou has said that autobiography is like going back to the past and making up stories to find lost things. Maya chose to write an autobiography because she loved using language to tell the truth to everyone. She goes back to her previous life and tells us about how society abused her. Nowadays, autobiographies are an unavoidable part of writing. For many years, autobiographies may have been considered a fundamental element of writing. It slowly became more important to show the social and psychological view of the world. Maya chose this genre and tells the story in a broad way to show how the subalterns in her society feel about fighting for freedom and quenching their thirst for it. Maya overcame the challenge of getting back the years she had lost; she also overcame the challenge of self-discovery, and this book shows that she is still committed to life’s struggles.

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