

Maya Angelou's Works Mapped on to the Writings of Select Journalists for the Voiceless Community

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The discrimination towards the black includes journalism which is a tool for gathering pieces of information and interpreting them in a straight manner but was utilized for sustaining the oppressed community in the society voiceless forever. As a matter of fact, the literature on the history of the black and feminist press shows the absence of the contributions from the black. Though the later part of 1800s and early part of 1900s saw a spate of writings from the black journalists, recent researches unearthed the contributions of the black women journalists-Mary Church Terrel, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Amy Jacques Garvey- through their diaries and autobiographies to confirm the suppression of their voices till then (Intro. Broussard). The white press discouraged their works owing to the racial nature of the content, even though they made sustained effort to reveal the existence of discrimination in their writings. These journalists found without proper reference for their being journalists but identified as a widow and daughter of someone. When deliberate attempt has been made recently to view their career from a literary perspective, their effort to attack racial discrimination for uplifting the lives of the black people through racial rights came to light.

The avoidance of publishing the article of coloured people by the white press was their attempt to suppress their voices only. Moreover, the white press calls their views “controversial” or “propaganda” (Broussard 50). Many of their works including autobiographies got rejected in order to discourage them from including any racial issues or even any reference to them.

The then prevailed practice of suppressing voices gets reinforced with the inclusion of incidents depicted in Maya Angelou's autobiographical novels which reflect on the way of the world in later part of 19th and early part of 20th century. Maya Angelou's autobiographical novels are a “list of facts about her life from age 3 to 17” (Cox 2). Her thorough knowledge about her environment in the “Deep South, the Midwest and California in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s” (2) prompted her to proceed to put “places and faces to life” (2). The detailed description of the incidents of discrimination faced by the author cum protagonist accentuates the terrible negative impact of discrimination on the morale of the black people.

The discrimination towards the black in the South finds expression in the novels of Maya Angelou to a noticeable extent. The descriptions carry the bottled-up emotions of the protagonist owing to discrimination to a tee. The change in her demeanour due to her stay in California with her mother after her mutism failed to make an impression on the white people in the vicinity where Maya spent her time back in Arkansas with her grandmother and the segregation continued however much the black became sophisticated in their behaviour. Her outburst in her think-aloud description distinctively pictures her inner desire to be treated on par with the white. Her expectations in her words which boasts of her “still-white though dusty gloves, my starched clothes” and her ability to “walk nearly three miles under a sun on fire and was neither gasping nor panting”(Angelou, Gather Together, Chap 17)with a “missionary zeal” to pick up an order reveal her assumption that she must be respected - despite all the physical hurdles she faces in the village and the warning of Mr. Willie Williams, a shopkeeper of her community against her challenging spirit-for her maintaining “cool decorum of a great lady in the tacky, putrid store”(Angelou, Gather Together, Chap 17). She chose the way to her destination through the area where the houses of the white community stood. Even within the shop, General Merchandise Store, she confronted the white tall saleswoman on the narrow corridor of the shop. When they crisscrossed on their path, the tone of the white woman while she said, “You stand still and I’ll pass you” (Angelou, Gather Together, Chap 17) sounded highly commanding and not a request. The moment she (Maya) commanded her back, she showed her loss of face and made Maya felt “rootless, nameless, pastless” (Angelou, Gather Together, Chap 17) as both the saleswomen teased her for her lack of identification owing to her belonging to the black community. This becoming an object of ridicule enraged Maya to lose her temper to shout back to call them any name like “Miss Idiot, Miss Stupid, Miss Fool or whatever name a luckless fate has dumped upon” (Angelou, Gather Together, Chap 17) those imperious white women.

The response of her grandmother when she received the call from those white women from the store for the sassy behavior of Maya shook her much and she forsook the idea of protesting the domineering attitude of the white. The treatment was so harsh that she “found herself in the soft dust in front of the porch” with the “backhand swing came down” (Angelou, Gather Together, chap 17)on her cheek and she noticed the associated harsh tone of hers in her warning against the possibility of being caught by the white men in revenge of her ill treatment of the white women to violate her or to trouble the family as a result of her resentment towards the white. The harsh manner with which her grandmother tried to inculcate in her the music which she would face for her impudent behavior might have quelled her desire for taking immediate revenge on the white for their overbearing attitude which had been within for centuries and passed through many generations.

However, this insolence is not due to her exposure to sophisticated comforts available in her mother’s place in California though it was expected of her to put on “a few siditty airs” (Angelou, Gather Together, chap 16). She was devoid of any worldly pretensions and was highly satisfied to be her usual self in Arkansas, the village even after visiting San Francisco

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but her elaborated description of the black being free in San Francisco satisfied their expectations.

In addition, the black journalists considered for the present paper were also against the lynching of black men by white men in order to protect the “honour” (Broussard 35) of their white women. Consequent upon white men being law makers and official executives, they advocated and perpetuated lynching and thus, prevented the black from dominating them with their manpower. In the name of quelling the riots due to race, white men indulged in the brutal way of putting an end to the black people’s resistance. Wells-Barnett accused them of being mute spectators of “this wholesale slaughter” (35) and never showed any opposition to this terrorism.

A parallel account of the black being lynched finds a place in Maya Angelou’s autobiographical novels. Maya was reminded of Bailey, the junior’s description of the lynching of a black man and how the incident provoked his thinking and questioning about the plight of the black in Arkansas in 1940, when she recalled the incidents of her life to reason avowal for sending the children back to their parents. Children’s botheration about the untoward happenings like lynching certainly forced her grandmother to pack them off to California where lynchings were never heard of (Angelou, *Gather Together*, Chap 16).

Equally reproachable were these journalists toward people of their own race. Wells-Barnett’s attack on the clergymen in her diary demands our attention here. She found fault with the religious men for being irresponsible towards the society. They failed to uplift the black people from their deplorable state.

An analogous situation which highlights the attack on clergy man playfully but factual is in the first novel of Maya Angelou. Reverend Howard Thomas, an obese, visited their village once in three months to collect the money for the preceding months and spent his time useless and actions unworthy of his stature and unprofitable to improve the welfare of his religious community. They talked about unimportant matter as to who got married, who died and how many children had been born to them since his last visit (Angelou, *I Know*, chap 6).

Moreover, Jacques Garvey held a high view on the talent and front of black women in managing the household economy. Modern women of any race were highly praised for their caliber to become economically independent with their tendency to work hard. Jacques Garvey’s complimentary view that “no line of endeavour” found to be “closed for long to the modern woman” (Broussard 103) testifies to their nature of rising up to the expectations or needs of the family and the society.

Maya Angelou befits the description of a modern black woman who deserves to be praised for her ingenuity on the economic front to survive her herself and her son in the aftermath of economic crisis. She was 17, when she assumed the role of a caretaker of his

son, Guy till then she lived with her mother and grandmother for some months. She liked not to lead parasitic existence but to be self-reliant to support herself and her son. Her hopes of being inducted into the army dashed to the grounds, the moment the recruiters knew about her training at Mission Labor School which was on the list of the House Un-American Activities Committee, HUAC. However, she tried her hand in almost everything in service and entertainment businesses for her and Guy's survival. She was a cafeteria worker, cook, prostitute, dancer, cabaret singer, waitress, restaurant manager and what not. In her words, Great Depression failed to check the black people to make a living with the hard-earned money. Crisis created opportunities to collect more money "in a month than they had seen in their whole lives". She admitted in the prologue of one of her autobiographies, *Mom and Me and Mom* how much growth she had attained with her grandmother's love and how it catapulted her from "immeasurable depths" (Angelou, *Me &Me &Mom*).

Another incident reveals how her penchant for becoming a conductorette on the San Francisco streetcars for her survival came to real after her judicious use of every resource she was familiar with and her decision to confront the receptionist and as a result of her resoluteness, she became the first Negro conductorette successfully. Till then the position was the prerogative of the male members of the Negro Community in San Francisco.

The incidence of colossal economic downturn, the Great Depression (1929-1942) (Kite 12) and the absence of any anti-lynching law during 1882 to 1968 saw people to the tune of 5,000 were lynched or killed (Egan 15) bear witness to the facts culled out from these autobiographical novels.

These writings of journalists and autobiographical works of Maya Angelou from 1970 onwards show, though expressed briefly, how much affected the black women and men were how far their voices were forced to sink to perpetuate the voiceless state of the marginalized and how brilliantly women managed to voice their societal problems later.

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