



A FEMINIST AND STYLISTIC READING OF MAYA ANGELOU'S *THE HEART OF A WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Maya Angelou is an Afro-American poet, memoirist, novelist and Civil Rights activist. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, several books of poetry and was credited with a list of plays, movies and television shows spanning over fifty years. Maya Angelou is an acclaimed American poet, story teller, activist and autobiographer. The research paper entitled **A Feminist and Stylistic Reading of Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*** is a powerful reflection on the experiences and resilience of women. It delves into themes of identity, strength, and the struggles faced by women in society. Angelou's use of language and imagery vividly captures the complexity of womanhood, offering a profound exploration of both personal and collective experiences. The novel celebrates the courage and resilience of women while acknowledging the challenges they face. It is a poignant reminder of the importance of recognizing and honouring the heart and spirit of every woman.

Keywords: Autobiography, Empowerment, Identity, Afro-American.

Introduction

African American literature is a body of literature written by Americans of African descent. Beginning in the pre-revolutionary war period, African American writers have engaged in a creative dialogue with American letters. It spans various genres, including novels, poetry, essays, and plays, and addresses themes such as identity, race, oppression, and resilience. From slave narratives to contemporary works, African American literature has played a crucial role in expressing the experiences and perspectives of Black Americans throughout history. The result is a literature rich in

expressive subtlety and social insight, offering illuminating assessments of American identities and history.

The Heart of a Woman, Maya Angelou's autobiography, explores how African-American women claims her identity amidst the white dominated American society. Maya Angelou faces discrimination in terms of class, culture, ethnicity and prejudice. Despite the discrimination, in terms of race, gender, class and cultural prejudices, Maya asserts her voice against all sort of mistreatment towards her. Maya presents the sufferings of the African Americans in America especially black women who are trapped in the social and cultural barriers by white Americans. She has also challenged white's illiterate behaviour and injustice in white dominated society in all her works. It also studies the way they became successful to change themselves from victims of racism into self-dignified women capable of responding to injustice and exploitation.

Maya Angelou uses writing as a vehicle to express African American's voice against the prejudice of whites in America. The research article entitled "A Feminist and Stylistic Reading of Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*", aims to analyse the stylistic aspects in Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman* in a feminist perspective. Through her stylistic choices, she transforms real life events into literary works which is explicated by the researcher in this article.

Maya Angelou is an intelligent African-American woman who is famous for her autobiographical novels, poetry and active participation in the segregation movement of 1960's. She is also known for her supreme skill with the poetic rhythm. Her style is renowned for what might be called its "Black Pride" and feminist liveliness, which adds an edge of strength and clarity to her works. Maya's fourth novel *The Heart of a Woman* is based on her journey, from place to place, from house to house, from coast to coast. To emphasize the theme of movement, she opens the text with a Biblical reference of Noah's ark: "The ole ark's a- moverin', a-moverin', the ole ark's a-moverin' along" (1). Unlike fictional forms such as the novel or short story, the plot in *The Heart of a Woman* focuses on the revelation of character rather than on the development of a line of action. It also has fewer emotional disruptions than the three earlier autobiographies.

Maya acts in a more mature manner both as a mother and a professional. As a

political organizer in Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, she achieves a level of competence. *The Heart of a Woman* is the work that signals Maya's maturity. She becomes more certain in her mothering, now that Guy is an adolescent. She promises herself to give up major tours, and find fulfilment in her New York environment as an actress, a writer, and a political organizer.

Maya's professional activities are interrupted when in 1961 she meets a South African, Vusumzi Make. Make takes Maya and Guy to Cairo where all of Maya's expectations are scattered mainly because of money problems. Maya gives a vivid account of her life as a child, a mother and a married woman. It is thus very clear that Maya uses the first person pronoun to present her emotions and experiences to her readers not only to entertain them but to educate them about life's ups and downs as well. Buchi Emecheta states: "Marriage is lovely when it works, but if it does not, should one condemn oneself?" (87) "I stopped feeling guilty for being me" (184). *The Heart of a Woman* ends with the divorce of Make and Maya, and the mother and son setting off to Liberia when Guy was seriously injured in a car accident.

Maya's place in the tradition of black women autobiography will be established by characterizing in political awareness, communal responsibility, knowledge of oppression and empathy for displacement. Maya gives an expression of Black oppression of racism, and her journey toward self-affirmation. Her autobiography achieves an effect of celebration of the rituals of the culture and the Black oral tradition. Maya's literary significance rests upon her ability to narrate story both as a Black American and a woman in the twentieth century. She illuminates the black past in an American context that provides her readers to realize the Black American experiences. As a woman, Maya finds out that a woman has a lot of masks which are difficult to take out. Her masks are shaped by her political view, her race and her family. Her story becomes a combination of these responsibilities of a black woman as a mother, as a woman and as an activist.

In Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou, Dolly Aimee Mcpherson explains her concern:

In *The Heart of a Woman*, and in the other volumes of the autobiography as well, Maya utilizes biographical and historical data to lead the reader away from the time- honoured myths and filtered understanding of the historically-bound present. While incorporating social and political issues in her work, she does not allow protest to dominate her writing to the exclusion of other concerns. Instead, she consciously broaches the subjects of survival and social change from a variety of vantage points: artist, activist, woman. (138)

Maya points out the historical and social developments of her term while writing autobiography. She not only tells her story from a black woman perspective, she also uses her political identity and her social role as a mother. This enables her to capture and to present the events from various perspectives. Maya uses her autobiographies to create the relationship between writing an autobiography and giving birth to a child.

The relationship between Maya and Guy has a powerful effect on the novel *The Heart of a Woman*. Maya in the Black society wants to protect her son from all evils. She is scared of the society, for it might look down upon her son. This is the reason for her to appear in all the scenes wherever Guy faces difficult situations. When John phones Maya to inform about Guy's involvement in the Brooklyn gang. She is extremely worried and blames herself for leaving him alone. Maya was ready to do anything for the sake of her son. Maya also brings out the relationship between her and her mother Vivian. Vivian also makes her appearance whenever Maya was in trouble. This was the reason for Maya to save her son from all difficult situation.

In *The Heart of a Woman*, Maya brings out the traumas of marriages. She wants to get married in order to find an identity for herself. She has a false belief that she can gain an identity through marriage. That does not mean she totally depends upon the man, but she wants to establish herself as a good wife. Maya, finds herself lost in both the marriages. Disappointments were the consequences of her marriages. Maya's fantasies about marriage which she created right from her childhood are the reason behind her disappointments. Another reason for Maya to get married was her son Guy. She wanted

Guy to have a father, so that he can be a better person in the society. Though Maya has not discussed these things with Guy, she says that she can understand his feeling, for, Maya too grew up in the same situation like Guy. After the failure of both the marriages she finds herself a new life. She finally realizes that an identity for oneself can be gained only by hard work. She becomes more mature and starts leading an independent life.

Race, like in the rest of the series, is a predominant theme in *The Heart of a Woman*. The book opens with Maya and Guy living in an experimental commune with white people, trying to participate in the new openness between Blacks and Whites. She is not completely comfortable with the arrangement; Maya never names her roommates, even though “naming” has been an important theme in her books. For the most part, Maya is able to get along well with whites, but she occasionally encounters prejudice, as when she needs help from white friends to rent a home in a segregated neighborhood.

The Heart of a Woman takes readers on a journey through Maya’s numerous roles - as a mother, wife, lover, and artist and the ever-evolving nature of identity. Reflecting on her marriages and her experience of motherhood. As exposed by Karen Karbo in her work *The Gospel According to Coco Chanel*: “Self-invention is an act of the imagination, the ongoing writing of an enormous never-ending novel in which you are the protagonist” (31), here also the search for truth, the discovery of inner self has been given importance. Maya asserts that the real identity of every woman is always a question unless she herself seeks to find it. Therefore, motherhood alone cannot be her identity, the concept of motherhood is thus deconstructed in *The Heart of a Woman*.

Maya candidly explores the challenges of love, the pursuit of self-worth, and the delicate balance of personal and professional aspirations. It also captures her growth and exploration as an artist. She takes readers behind the scenes, chronicling her experiences in the entertainment industry and her friendships with influential figures such as James Baldwin and Billie Holiday. Through her vivid descriptions and reflections, Angelou artfully portrays her quest for artistic liberation and expression.

Throughout the novel, Maya’s writing is characterized by its poetic beauty, evocative imagery, and lyrical language. She uses her unique voice to transport readers to different settings, capturing the essence of time and place with remarkable clarity.

Maya's *The Heart of a Woman* is a compelling and mesmerizing testimony of a woman's journey towards self-discovery and social consciousness. It stands as a testament to the strength of the human spirit, inspiring readers to embrace their own experiences and find solace in the power of love, resilience, and personal growth.

The Heart of Woman is about the power of determination and never giving up on our dreams. Despite facing numerous obstacles and setbacks, Maya remains determined to achieve her goals and make a name for herself as a writer and performer. *The Heart of a Woman* emphasizes the importance of resilience in the face of adversity. Angelou overcomes a series of personal challenges, including failed marriages and financial struggles, but she never allows these experiences to break her spirit. Instead, she uses them as stepping stones to learn and grow.

Maya explores and embraces her own identity, discovering her passions in writing, activism, and the arts. Readers are encouraged to take the time to engage in self-reflection and seek their own passions and purpose in life. Maya shows us that vulnerability is not a weakness but a necessary part of personal growth and connection with others. She shares her innermost thoughts and emotions, even when they are painful or difficult, which allows her to form deeper relationships and connect with readers on a profound level.

The mother and child relationship is put forth by Maya while declaring Vivian's care for her and Maya's anxiety of Guy's growth: "Fruit does not fall from the tree" (2) also refers to the mother-child bond. Fruit is implied as child while tree is implied as mother. As Maria Montessori says: "Children have an absorbent mind. They absorb knowledge from the environment without fatigue . . . This is the moment in the life of man when we can do something for the betterment of humanity and further brotherhood" (150), the significance of the role of a mother is reiterated in these lines. Hence, the inseparable bond between the mother and the child is an unconscious attitude that takes place in the novel.

The Heart of a Woman highlights the power of women and their ability to create change. Angelou discusses her involvement in the civil rights movement and her commitment to fighting for equal rights for all. The book serves as a reminder of the

importance of standing up for what we believe in and actively working towards a more just and inclusive society. This novel displays a unique and intimate view into Maya's life, presenting a rich tapestry of her relationships, personal growth, and political activism. Through her lyrical prose and powerful storytelling, Maya invites the readers into her world, exposing the complexities, triumphs, and struggles she encountered as a black woman living in a racially divided society.

Conclusion

The novel explains some features of literary style that Maya chooses to present her narratives. The significance of the stylistic techniques used by Maya proves her as a crafty writer who writes with style that enables her stories to come out with a clear message. Her poetic prose and powerful imagery further underscore the message of female empowerment and agency, making it a significant contribution to feminist literature. However, it is logical that for every story, be it fiction or non-fiction, there must be a way of narration with a bit or more of artistic and literary flavor. It is, therefore, very factual for any reader of the autobiographies of Maya to acknowledge that her life stories are interestingly told by a master story-teller. The autobiography of a woman creative writer is therefore, a great asset to understand her creative genius, feminine sensibility and individualism. This research article entitled "A feminist and stylistic reading of Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*" observes how Maya's work challenges traditional gender roles and celebrates the strength and resilience of women. It emphasizes the importance of self- discovery, empowerment, and the pursuit of one's dreams, regardless of societal expectations.

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