

**“Still I Rise”: A Study of Post-Traumatic Growth in the Autobiographies
of Maya Angelou**

A Thesis Submitted

To

Sikkim University



In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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I, **Manisha Shrestha**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis entitled ““Still I Rise”: A Study of Post-Traumatic Growth in the Autobiographies of Maya Angelou”, is the record of work done by me, that the contents of the thesis did not form the basis of awards of any previous degree to me, or to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else. The thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other university/institute. This has been submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English. School of Languages and Literature, Sikkim University, Gangtok. India.

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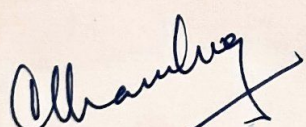
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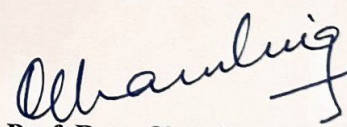
CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled ““Still I Rise”: A Study of Post-Traumatic Growth in the Autobiographies of Maya Angelou” submitted to the Sikkim University for partial fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English, embodies the result of bonafide research work carried out by Manisha Shrestha under my guidance and supervision. No part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other Degree, Diploma, Association and Fellowship. All the assistance and help received during the course of investigation have been daily acknowledged by her.

I recommend this thesis to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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Angelou”

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Faith, hope and love could propel one from the darkest of times, back to oneself.

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I thank god for blessing me with it all.

Preface

This work is an interdisciplinary study. It seeks to study the autobiographies of Maya Angelou, through the lens of post-traumatic growth. The work has attempted to study Angelou's journey from her trauma as a Black American, as a Black American Woman, and as a person, to growth. It has sought to do this, through the study of her seven autobiographies – *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002) and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013).

Trauma theory, a new area of interest to researchers all around the globe. The theory was developed and popularised only in the 1990s by Cathy Caruth and Kali Tal. The theory of post-traumatic growth was developed around the same time, primarily by two professors of psychology – Dr. Richard Tedeschi and Dr. Lawrence Calhoun in the mid-1990s. Unlike natural beliefs, post-traumatic stress disorder is not a destination that one reaches, after trauma. Most people who undergo trauma, eventually undergo posttraumatic growth. However, this concept is still not as popular. In the literary field, students of trauma theory mainly discuss the causes and effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet, not much work done with the theory of post-traumatic growth as the base of their critical work.

Maya Angelou's work has been studied from the perspective of the culturally discriminatory condition of the blacks in America, from the feminist perspective of her works, especially her poems and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The theme of love and freedom has been studied in her works. Trauma in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been widely studied. There have been some scholars who've sought to study her recovery from trauma in too. However, this work paves the way to study her from a new critical

standpoint. It seeks to trace her journey to growth, through things that influenced and shaped her - her cultural background, her identity as a woman in an already marginalised community, through the presence or absence of the most important people of her life – men and women, and her journey into the sublimation of all her trauma through creative expression.

The thesis has been divided into five chapters:

1. **Introduction** – The first chapter lays the foundation for the work by introducing Angelou, the concept of trauma, post-traumatic stress and the theory of post-traumatic growth. It discusses the evolution of these theories and how it would be used in the work to trace Angelou's journey from being a little girl born into trauma and full of fear and insecurities due to the circumstances she was forced to live with, to being the phenomenal woman that the world recognises her as today.
2. **Reading the “Black Past”: The Invisible Scar of Racism** – The second chapter studies the environment and the racial prejudices that influenced and shaped her as a person. It seeks to study how her identity as a Black American took shape through the years, by studying the effect that race and racial prejudices had on her as a child, the defense and coping mechanism she employed to live through it and later, as a grown woman, to rise above it.
3. **A Woman in the ‘Black’ World: A Fiery Fight Against Patriarchy** – The third chapter studies her identity as a Black American Woman. It studies the challenges Angelou underwent because of it – the sexual abuse that she underwent, the inferiority she lives through as a Black girl who cannot conform to the white standards of beauty and how she rises out of it eventually. The work studies the effect that the men in her life, had upon her and the strength she derived from the women in her life.

4. **Reading through Pain: Narration of Pain** – The fourth chapter studies about the importance, effect and result of narrating one’s pain. It discusses how black autobiographies have always been an act of revolution and how while Angelou does seek to revolt by narrating her truth, writing an autobiography is also her personal attempt at sublimating her pain and finding cohesiveness.
5. **‘Still I Rise’: The Rise of the Phoenix** – The fifth chapter is the conclusion. This chapter sums up the findings, limitations, contributions, and further scope of this research. It highlights the different issues that were raised in the previous chapters.

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Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

1.2 The intersection between literature and psychology

1.3 Theoretical framework

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1.6. Aims and Objectives

1.7. Conclusion

1.1. Introduction

I thought if I wrote a book, I would have to examine the quality on human spirit that continues to rise despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Rise out of physical pain and psychological cruelties.

Rise from being victims of rape and abuse and abandonment to the determination to be no victim of any kind.

Rise and be prepared to move on and ever on. (*Angelou The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 1166)

Marguerite Angelou, later, called Maya Angelou was a phenomenal woman – a force that tore through every pain that life threw at her. Born as a woman, in an already neglected and abused community of the Blacks, Angelou could still rise and transform herself from a mere person to an idea that still lives after eight years of her demise, and will live on through her works. Having risen out of her ashes again and again, after facing burns from traumatic events through her life, she is known today as a poet, singer, dancer, producer, screen-play writer, actor, feminist, apartheid activist and literary writer; one of the most inspirational women the world has seen.

1.2. The intersection between literature and psychology

Literature is an expression, and a representation, primarily, of human experience. The different areas of social sciences are all only varied reflections of human experience and therefore, depend on each other to make it more comprehensive. In his work, *Consciousness and the Novel* Connected Essays, David Lodge writes, "... literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have. Lyric poetry is arguably man's most successful effort to describe qualia. The novel is arguably man's most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time" (Lodge

qtd in Aras 251). According to Noam Chomsky, "... we will always learn more about human life and personality from novels than from scientific psychology" (Chomsky qtd. in Aras 251). Psychology is called the science without a definition. However, Kagan and Haveman seek to explain it as "the science that systematically studies and attempts to explain observable behavior and its relationship to the unseen mental processes that go on inside the organism and to external events in the environment" (Kagan & Haveman qtd. in Aras 251).

Both, literature and psychology seek to study and understand the concerns of what it is to be human. Both these areas attempt to touch the essence of that which governs human life – the mind and the soul. Psychology is the science that studies human behaviour and the human mind. Literature is an artform that represents the same through the means of words, through fiction or even non-fiction.

In spite of the structuralist and semiotician, Roland Barthes' ground-breaking proclamation that a text becomes dissociated with the author as soon as one completes the task of writing it, there are several other styles of criticism that look at a text as a flavour of the writer, or a mirror of the author's mind. A psychological analysis of a text involves "analyzing the author's personality, the way a certain literary work was made, the psychological types which are present in the literary works and the characteristics of their behavior, and finally the effect of literature on its readers" (Wellek & Warren qtd. in Emir 50-51). In his work, "On the Interaction Between Literature and Psychology", Daniel Yimer writes, "Psychoanalytic literary criticism is based on the argument that if literature is the expression of the author's 'persona', human behaviour must be analyzed to find the interaction of the conscious and unconscious elements of the mind in it" (Yimer 163).

Apart from this, the true understanding of a work is complete only after a psychological understanding of the characters of the story or a text in general. Also, it is not only the creator

or the work or the created, but even the readers of the text, whose personal inclinations and interpretations play a pivotal role in the acceptance of popularity of a work or an aspect of that work. The interpretation of a work is as important as writing itself. A reader's interpretation springs from their identity and therefore from their expectations, and defenses. Academician Ismet Emre states that,

Beside literature and psychology there is no other branch of science which is engaged so much in the study of the relationship between human body and soul, with its contradictions and dilemmas, making efforts to define the relationship in terms of certain rules, to know the mysterious aspects of the human soul and its subconscious areas by means of long and detailed journeys: at the same time both branches have been struggling in their existence between arts and science for about a century. (Emir 1)

1.3.Theoretical framework

1.3.1. Defining trauma

The term “trauma” stems from the Greek word, meaning “wound” – physical, emotional or psychological. It is a “metaphor borrowed from the domain of medicine and extended to a wide range of experiences” (Kirmayer et. al. 4). It could signify the wound that can be seen through the naked eye, the one that causes the skin to tear or bones to crack or break. It could also signify the kind of wound that leaves no physical scar, but a psychological and spiritual one that causes the cracking open of the abstract core that comprises the essence of one's personality, causing it to break and dissolve into thin air. Such a wound often leaves the person with no solid ground to stand on; with their identity torn to shreds, their ideas of the principles of the world they live in, of the people around them, their own position of purpose in the midst of this world turns into a painfully incomprehensible chaos that must return, again and again, to tie up all the loose ends.

In his work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud states that “the living vesicle... is provided with a protective shield against stimuli” (Freud *Beyond* 22) from the external world. This shield is often, the illusory sense of safety that one believes in with an “unrealistic optimism” (Rendon 70). Janoff-Bulman believed that “people develop a core sense of themselves based on the moral universe that they think they love in. She calls it the assumptive self...” (Rendon 71). Whether an event breaks through it or not, depends on the history of beliefs of a particular person. However, when an event breaks through that shield, no matter how big or small, the person's very idea of existence undergoes a fissure. While in the earlier understanding of trauma, the researchers restricted trauma to bigger, more violent events, more recent study has come to conclude to trauma is an emotional, subjective response to any event. It does not reside in an event, but in the response of a person to an event.

1.3.2. The origin and evolution of trauma studies

While some psychoanalysts like Jean Marcot Charcot, Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan were seeking to understand trauma itself, Cathy Caruth and Kali Tal studied the effects that it had on memory – personal, and cultural. According to the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, trauma is that excitation which breaks through the psychological shield that a person builds around themselves, for protection. Jacques Lacan, a diligent student of Freud, says that trauma forms the kernel of one's being since the time one enters into language and faces the failure of his/her needs or desires. Lacan believed that a one's personality is their reaction to the various kinds of trauma one faces through life. It is this that shapes their perception too.

While “trauma”, as a concept was understood and studied as a concept of psychology since years, it was not until the Vietnam War that the idea of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) came into being and transformed the concept of “trauma” into a full-fledged area of

psychological study. For a long period, it was mainly associated with the condition of “shell shock” that the soldiers of the period underwent.

PTSD is one of the psychological reactions that a person can have to an event. It includes having distressing memories, nightmares, flashbacks, distrust, alienation, loss of hope, loss of one’s principal beliefs – of people they are associated with, of the way the world functions, and of one’s place in it. Any element, event, place, scent, music etc, could act as a trigger that could sweep one off the present and drag them into the incomprehensible whirl of past memories and gaps in that memory. The fear that one might have, of reliving this past in any way, might cause constant anxiety and in severe cases cause anxiety or panic attacks.

A later psychologist, Cathy Caruth, pays less attention in defining trauma and more on the holes it tears into one’s memory that, in order to get filled, keep returning to the victim. She studies trauma, not as a pathology of the unconscious but of history itself. Her primary study is on the reception of the traumatic event – the distortion of memory of the time of the event. According to her, the person who undergoes the traumatic event does not truly ‘receive’ the event factually due to shock. It, in turn, remains a void in his/her mind. In her work, *Trauma and Experience*, she quotes Dr. Laub who writes,

History was taking place with no witness: it was also the very circumstance of being inside the event that made the unthinkable the very notion that the witness could exist.... The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially not be met during the actual occurrence. (Laub qtd. in Caruth *Trauma and Experience* 7).

The mind tries to fill this memory through nightmares and flashbacks, which only intensifies the pain of the person, unable to decipher the memory with only a blurred idea of the pain that grows wilder through imagination. The unconscious attempt of the mind to fill the gap causes it to play broken pieces of that memory in loops, while one tries to escape it. The

“latency”, as Freud calls it, is trauma, according to Caruth. For, as she says, the impact of the trauma is in its belatedness.

Memory and emotions are closely associated with the biological functioning of the brain. Biological effects in the brain are a corollary of trauma. The brain is naturally designed to comprehend, and classify. It seeks to understand ideas or incidents and find patterns in them. It is when the brain is met with an incident that is new to its previous styles of comprehension that it gets confused and therefore, immediately releases adrenaline – a hormone that sets the person in a ‘fight or flight’ mode.

While this hormone is essential for survival, when a person undergoes psychological trauma and must consciously or unconsciously keep revisiting the memory due to the effect trauma usually has - hypervigilance and hyperarousal, which result in the more evident manifestations – nightmares, panic attacks, insomnia, flashbacks etc, especially because of various triggers one might come across, it becomes a habitual but unconscious practice. This makes it more and more difficult for the person to have any control of these hormones, causing the trauma to not just intensify but become a trap that one might often fail to escape. This could also result in the failing of the pre-frontal cortex, which diminishes the capacity for social emotions. There is a shortening of the hippocampus, which in certain cases, causes short-term memory loss. It is due to this unavoidable mutation of a once, comparatively stable biological constitution of the mind, that one continues to face the same pain and hurt and feelings of a lingering pain long after one has passed the time of the incident, the incident itself, or the people or place that might have originally caused it. In “Biological Studies of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”, Pitman and the others write:

It is tempting to assume that because PTSD by definition is caused by a psychologically traumatic environmental event, any biological abnormality found to accompany PTSD must also have been traumatically induced. (Pitman 769)

Apart from this, studies have come to realise that trauma is often transgenerational. Cathy Caruth states that one's trauma "is never simply one's own [. . .] [but] precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Balaev 151). It affects those around, and is often passed down as an unfortunate legacy of pain and fear through generations as a form of care. When James Baldwin writes about the efforts an African American parents must put before bringing their children before the truth of their existence as a member of the Black community, he means the same. When Isabel Wilkerson talks about how the act of waiting by an African American parent, before telling their children about the reality even they would have to endure, just because of the colour of their skin is a "loving thing" (Wilkerson 209), she means the same too.

1.3.3. Trauma and popular culture

It is commonly understood and believed that pain and darkness have an alluring effect. However, in the world today, these ideas are not only believed to be alluring; they are celebrated. This has affected the discourse of modern living. Conflict, pain and trauma dominate the understanding of people, of things that are surrounded with, and of themselves even. Due to an undue commitment to this perspective, the presentation of the reality of the world as a whole is grim. No pain, or joy is a popular understanding. Despite it being a journey from one to the other, somehow, popular culture glorifies the point of pain. Conflict is usually portrayed as a stagnant condition that one must endure forever.

Pain and trauma are not recent developments. They have always existed. However, every century expressed or discussed it with a different literary style. In England, in the age of

Dryden and Pope, due to the importance being placed on political matters, it was expressed through critical and political works. In the Romantic Age, the dualistic effects of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, the lack of living space, the absence of employment opportunities was expressed by its absence in literature through the ideals of escapism and the shift of poetic focus from the lack of perfection in the society to the presence of it, in Nature.

In the modern age, the truth of the times was told through a reflection of the selves – through broken, fragmented narratives. However, the perspective that the world chooses to live in, does not just remain an ideal of literary significance but usually, permeates the social atmosphere like air which is then, breathed in as facts. The unavoidable discourse surrounding trauma and conflict in every field of existence is a proof of this. However, lately, there has been a fortunate shift from this. As was theorised by the Anglo-Irish poet – W. B. Yeats, time is a gyre and every event, thought, idea or revolution that evolves, must dissolve for new ideas and movements to be born from that dissolution. Recent times have had a heart-warming growth in the field of positivist ideas and theories.

1.3.4. The origin of post-traumatic growth as a theory in psychology

Although the possibilities of positive changes following adverse events were recognized for long time, the focus was mainly on negative effects such as depression, posttraumatic disorder (PTSD) etc. Despite everything, people continue to live meaningful lives. In “The relationship between post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth in cancer patients and survivors: A systematic review and meta-analysis”, Allison Marziliano, Malwina Tuman, Anne Moyer write “58–83% of survivors had retrospectively reported posttraumatic growth following trauma” (Marziliano et al. 2020).

McMillen & Fisher (1998) conceptualized it as ‘perceived benefits’. Since the common approach towards evaluation of effects of negative events is by deficit approach, McMillen and

Fisher adapted the opposite, measuring benefit approach that focusses on positive outcomes. In another detailed study, it was conceptualized as positive illusions.

The capacity to develop and maintain positive illusions may be thought of as a valuable human resource to be nurtured and promoted, rather than an error-prone processing system to be corrected. In any case, these illusions help make each individual's world a warmer and more active and beneficent place in which to live. (Taylor and Brown, 1998)

Among many such conceptualizations, one that came close to the current understanding is elucidated by Park et al (Park et al 1996) where they use the term 'stress-related growth' and venture towards development of stress-related growth scale. Currently the accepted term referring to the positive outcomes of a negative event is 'posttraumatic growth' (PTG). This varies with respect to stress-related growth concept as PTG focusses on the larger array of impact of potentially traumatic events and its positive changes. In other words, it does not limit to lower levels of stress and its positive effects.

Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) term it as 'the disruption' caused by the event that acts as the fundamental cause for growth development. In contrast to the concepts of positive illusions and perceived benefits, PTG has been shown to include real transformative changes in people. Few other research has drawn parallels with hardiness, optimism, flourishing and resilience. However, these terms and concepts have now been differentiated from PTG. The currently accepted understanding of PTG was given by Tedeschi and Calhoun. They summarise it as:

Posttraumatic growth describes the experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas, has surpassed what was present before the struggle with crises occurred. The individual has not only survived, but has experienced changes that are viewed as important, and that go beyond what was the previous status quo.

Posttraumatic growth is not simply a return to baseline—it is an experience of improvement that for some persons is deeply profound. (Tedeschi and Calhoun “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence.” 2004)

Thus, they define PTG as the meaningful ‘change’ that goes beyond coping with distress and challenges with emphasis on the word ‘growth’ in PTG referring to positive changes that were absent before the traumatic event. PTG is not merely the means of coping or surviving the traumatic event, it is a ‘change’ that has substantial life changing effect. Thus, it differs from resilience, since resilience is the ability to continue to function at the same level despite trauma. Study has also found that people with a higher resilience, usually have a lower chance of undergoing PTG, because of their ability to cope with things quickly. Unless the person is thrown off balance, and must reconstruct the meaning of themselves, of people around them, and their place in the world, the possibility of transformation on an essential level is scarce.

Unlike, common belief and popular understanding, it is post-traumatic growth that is more common than post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Calhoun and Tedeschi along with few other researchers have shown that PTSD is often the driving force for PTG since the individuals find new purpose and overcome cognitive disruption and confusion. In the journey to PTG, in several cases, PTSD is often a divergence. While PTSD is only a temporary result of trauma, PTG that is its eventual outcome. This theory was primarily conceived by two psychology professors from the University of North Carolina, Dr. Richard Tedeschi and Dr. Lawrence Calhoun. Their study originated from their intention to help people live through, overcome and recover from various life crises. While exploring and interacting with various people, who had been harshly affected by some illness or accident, they met some extraordinary individuals who turned their incapability into their life’s work by trying to help others who might be undergoing a similar situation. During one study, they discovered the research of

psychiatrist, William Sledge – a work that would help them grow the phenomenal theory of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG).

Dr. Sledge had conducted a study on various war prisoners of the Vietnam War. Those were people who had spent years in tiny cells, in solitary confinements, or were kept chained to each other. They were not only deprived of food or any medical care, but also beaten and tormented. The statements they made during the interview, however, made no sense to Dr. Sledge. He says,

They had a hard time, they were clear about that. But so often they would say things like, ‘I kind of miss it. It was an intense experience. I learned a lot from it’.... There was an idea that if you get through life’s challenge with some grace and dignity, you would probably learn something from it. In my mind, that wasn’t a psychological issue, that was just human nature. (Rendon 12-13)

1.3.5. Rediscovering and restructuring of meaning and self

PTG seeks to address the meaning system of a person that trauma affects most. Every person stands on the foundational ground of the belief that they are safe and away from all harm. Research suggests that “people's beliefs in personal control are sometimes greater than can be justified.” (Taylor and Brown 196). This is an illusion which breaks, sometimes through cracks and sometimes with a full blow. This shattering of beliefs causes one to question everything. One begins to question the world one lives in, the principles that governs this world and one’s place in it. Park and Folkman write, “A traumatic event threatens global meaning, thereby initiating the meaning-making process. It is the challenge of the coping process to integrate situational meaning (appraisal of the trauma) with global meaning” (Park and Folkman qtd. in Zoellner and Maercker 630). It shatters the core ideas of the person, leaving him/her in a void of existence, with no purpose or meaning. This continues to torment the

person as long as they avoid the memories of the half-remembered event. However, once one braves oneself to face it, understand and attempt to comprehend it, one gets one step closer to growing from it.

When the person seeks to fathom this blurred memory, one faces tremendous pain. However, it is only after this, that one grows from it by re-building one's core – the basic belief system, about the world and oneself. PTG is a positive change that one experiences after undergoing a traumatic episode in one's life. One begins to perceive oneself then, not as a victim but as a survivor. One develops greater appreciation of the life one is living, of the relationship they share with others, become more hopeful of the opportunities life might throw at them, begin to acknowledge and own their strong and resilient spirit, causing in them a drastic, almost spiritual growth. In *Upside*, Rendon writes about how

The trauma has made the survivors' old way of understanding the world unworkable. They need to abandon it and find a new way of thinking about themselves, a new way of understanding the world around them... they will have to move forward, using deliberate rumination, narrative reframing, and other tools to build a new and often deeper sense of faith and spirituality. (Rendon)

Post-traumatic growth requires one to have a certain amount of creativity. Rendon talk about how “One must think creatively about one's life, one's past, and the possibilities for the future, in order to grow. It is a creative leap” (Rendon). But, apart from this, finding newer ways to express oneself, and exposing oneself to newer experiences also act as a catalyst in healing and growth.

When one undergoes trauma, one faces a resurfacing of memories – blur and tormenting. This happens, sometimes in the form of a nightmare, and sometimes as an uncontrollable flashback that repeats itself on and on inside the mind of the traumatised

individual. However, the cure to this loop is in the performance of the process that leads one to such pain. It is in sweeping in the memories before oneself by, and for deliberate rumination. This, as Rendon writes in his work *Upside*, is the means to discover the core ideals and meaning that trauma robs one of. It is only when one abandons one's fruitless attempts to escape memories and embraces them can one truly comprehend the pattern and discover newer versions of truth that could fit in one's post-traumatic life.

Positive psychology, in general, has changed the cliché view that psychological well-being is merely an absence of any sort of mental difficulty. Instead, it presents the idea that mental wellbeing is a continuous process – a circular journey from being hurt to healing oneself, to another trigger or event and healing oneself again. And, this cannot be a simple, linear route.

1.3.6. *The presence of post-traumatic growth in literature*

Regardless of the popular perspective with regard to trauma, most people heal actually from it. The archetypal heroes of the mythical past, or of literature, always earned this coveted title after rising from their personal abyss of hopelessness. A character that seeks to rise from their pain and suffering, or succeeds to rise above it is titled as a “hero”, irrespective of the gender implications the words carry. It could be Jesus in the *Bible*, Noah in the *Book of Genesis*, Ram in *Ramayana*, Draupadi in *Mahabharata*, Mulan in *The Ballad of Mulan*, Satan in *Paradise Lost* (1667), Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Miriam in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), Patrick in *Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), or Bruce Wayne in *Batman* for that matter. Despite the different time periods these characters belong to, no matter when these books were written and published, no matter their gender or their geographical positions, they are heroes because of the essential commonality they share – a tale of rising or at least trying persistently to rise again.

In “Still I Rise”, Angelou writes, “Just like moons and like suns, / With the certainty of tides, / Just like hopes springing high, / Still I'll rise.” (Angelou, *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry* 160). In an attempt to find meaning, and herself, Angelou fell down several times. She lived through several jobs – from working as a prostitute, to working for the rights of women and of the Black community. She lived through several failed marriages, and yet she rose above them all with such grace and strength.

In *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Patanjali speaks about the concept of *Pratipaksha Bhavana*, also known as *Vipareet Bhavana*. The words, “pratipaksha” and “vipareet” mean “opposite” or “counter”. He speaks about how one must be aware of the thoughts that come to one or rather, the thoughts that one generates. He was of the opinion that negative thoughts go against the *Yamas* – the list of abstinences one is expected to practice in one’s life, and *Niyamas* – the list of observances one must practice to grow closer to being in perfect amity with everyone and everything, that have been prescribed in the Classical or *Ashtanga* Yoga. He had therefore written that whenever one is faced with a negative thought one must seek to consciously counter it with a positive thought. He believed that with effort, one could bring about a paradigm shift in one’s thought process and therefore one’s life, through a conscious routine of countering the unconscious practice of negativity with positivity.

While spiritual experiences were previously discounted from the study of psychology, Psychiatrists Stanislav and Christina Grof sought to integrate this valid experience and its psychological effect by inventing the term “altered states”. This was a term that sought to coalesce the experiences beyond the body – spontaneous spiritual experiences, with the study of the psyche and the mind. They did not agree to the popular belief that experiences as those was not the ‘normal’ way of experiencing reality, and therefore created a space in psychology which was inclusive to even spiritual experiences by creating the model of “spiritual emergencies”.

Apart from this, there was a separate school of psychology that particularly deals with spiritual self-development, peak experiences, systemic trance, mystical experiences, spiritual crises, self beyond the ego, spiritual evolution, altered states of consciousness, religious conversion, and other unusually expanded or sublime experiences of living. It is called transpersonal psychology.

Victor Frankl, in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), presents a very positivist recording of the brutal concentration camps as a Jewish survivor. He describes his experiences in the agonising Nazi camps while discussing the psychotherapeutic method of surviving it all. He is the originator of another outstanding positive theory – Logotherapy. According to him one of the most essential needs to live is to have a purpose, a meaning in life. When a person undergoes a certain situation, the first thing that they tend to lose is their purpose in life and therefore, the meaning of their life or their existence. Therefore, unlike psychotherapy, logotherapy is not retrospective or introspective. It does not focus on what or why it was, but on what could be or will be. He believed that life can have meaning even in the midst of miserable circumstances and that, the motivation to live comes from finding that meaning. He says, "...everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (Frankl 68). At another instance in the book, he writes

Long after I had resumed normal life again... somebody showed me an illustrated weekly with photographs of prisoners lying crowded on their bunks, staring dully at visitor. "Isn't it terrible, the dreadful staring faces – everything about it." "Why?", I asked, for I genuinely did not understand. For at the moment I saw it all again... how content we were; happy in spite of everything." (Frankl, 58-59)

As mentioned above, it is true that a traumatic incident alters the mind biologically, but it is also true that it is the same factor of alteration that also allows it to adapt to the new situation. When the brain is met with a new, confusing or traumatising situation, it re-wires itself to survive and therefore adapts to it. In biological terms, it is called ‘neuroplasticity’. While popular belief associates the word ‘trauma’ to incidents specifically, trauma is a subjective experience that results from an objective reality. The effect that an incident has on people, their psyche, their meaning system and therefore, their lives. trauma is more or less. No one incident of trauma, comparable to another, since the overwhelming and staggering effect it has on the individuals facing it, is often the same. The only factor that causes any difference in the effect of trauma, is the resilience people build in themselves through their lifetimes, through the facing of and growing from various other traumatic experiences.

Various writers and their books showcase a similar positivist tendency. In *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), when the fifteen-year-old Ann Frank says that “...in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart”, she is doing a similar thing. When the American poet, Mary Oliver says, “Someone I loved once gave me/ a box full of darkness. / It took me years to understand/ that this, too, was a gift” (Oliver), she is doing the same.

In her work, *Surviving the Angel of Death* (2009), Eva Moses Kor touches a similar chord. An unfortunate victim of the Nazi camps – both, Auschwitz and Birkenau, she was born in a small village of Portz, Romania, in a family of five. Her parents, an elder sister and her twin – Mirium. She was only 6 when her life took a drastic turn with the capture and separation of her family to the Nazi camps. Since she and Mirium were twins they were kept separately with other twins who were forced to be a part of the brutal twin experiments by the so called ‘angel of death’, Dr Josef Mengele, the chief of all medical experiments at Auschwitz.

When the Russian troops freed the Jews from the Nazi regime, Eva had already endured five complete years of utter trauma. While in her initial years, she imagined, she was completely free of it all, it slowly began to haunt her again as a blurry memory of pain that others could not relate to, leaving her lonely and broken. After gaining popularity with her interviews, she pleaded for a search for the infamous Dr Mengele. He was never found, but later, his body was located. The angry Eva refused to believe this as truth and continued her raging search, until one day when she chose to forgive him, not for anyone but herself, as she said, she deserved to be free not only from the camp but from the violence it had rooted in her mind in the form of rage. What appeared as a simple act of forgiveness on the surface, it was a momentous choice that celebrates human spirit in all its glory.

William Styron, the author of the popular *Sophie's Choice* (1979), underwent a trauma because of a sudden change of lifestyle. As he writes in his work – *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1989), “like a great many American writers” (Styron) he too had a “lethal addiction to alcohol” (Styron). At the age of sixty, when he quit it rather abruptly. This sudden abstinence pushed him into an abyss of void that he could hardly comprehend or classify at first but later, discovered it to be depression. After a yearlong struggle with this “diabolical discomfort of being imprisoned in a fiercely overheated room” (Styron), and having spent most time of the year in a hospital, he wrote and published this work. However, even while this book attempts to speak about the indescribable somewhat coherently, but elaborately, it gives one hope. Styron does not end the work with pain, but with hope. He says,

By far the great majority of the people who go through even the severest depression survive it, and live ever afterward at least as happily as their unafflicted counterparts. Save for the awfulness of certain memories it leaves, acute depression inflicts few permanent wounds. (Styron)

1.3.7. The significance of trauma and post-trauma literature

Literature has influenced human evolution and trauma has played a significant role in it. It is not by coincidence that major traumatic events usually are followed by large scale productivity boost and progress in thinking. Similarly, at an individual scale, trauma is followed by growth and new creative outbursts. In this regard, Freud highlights the terms ‘the talking cure’, ‘cleansing of the soul’ and ‘being healed’ in his psychoanalysis referring to the posttraumatic creative expression such as literature (Freud 1382; Heidarizadeh 2014). On the other hand, Cathy Caruth adapts a traditional trauma model where trauma is viewed as a consciousness fragmenting event and prevents linguistic representation. This model focusses on the severity of suffering and its effect on psyche and its dissociation. In this model, the unspeakability of the trauma is based on the extreme experience and the resulting fracture in language and consciousness that are present beyond the boundaries of normal consciousness. Caruth expands Freud’s interpretation by considering that trauma is inherently unrepresentable and has relation between individual and cultural groups, thus covering from rape, war, discrimination, feminism etc.

In similar lines, Herman talks about the bodily integrity of the trauma survivors (Herman 1992) and infers that the survivors create new connections with their dissociated self, resulting from the trauma. In these lines, the body becomes an important aspect in both trauma recovery and literary arts. Beauvoir says “the body is not a thing, it is a situation, it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects” (Beauvoir 2009). The suffering body also witnesses the suffering it is going through, thus, during the therapeutic process, the dissociated self, i.e., victim is distanced from the self-creating a sense of safety. This therapeutic process of establishing safety is connected to literary arts. This enables the artist to evaluate and reconstruct the traumatic events which aids in their storytelling.

Caruthian concept was followed by rapid increase in studies on trauma in both fiction and non-fiction sections of the literature. With this another newer model emerged termed as pluralistic trauma theory that had opposing views to the traditional Caruthian model as it challenges the unspeakability and cultural dimensions (Balaev 2018). Based on these models, literary trauma texts focus on trauma's effect on literature from different perspectives as the attempt to communicate the events of trauma varies. Analysis and understanding of the effect of trauma and posttraumatic growth in literature has been an active topic of research interest that gives insights into the mind of the writers. Let us consider few observed examples in this regard to grasp the influence of trauma. Sylvia Plath's poetry has been studied extensively. One of the researchers mention that her poetry is out rightly subjective: a serene stasis of her mental anguish as she is a confessional poet (Beg, 2019). They also observed that her early career poetry showcased her inherent poetic talent while the later career poetry expresses her mastery and maturity in poetic craftsmanship.

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) has been studied in those who experienced natural disasters, sexual assault, medical diagnosis etc. Pannebaker and Graybeal (2001) postulated that the individual feels more connected with their surroundings when undertaking expressive writing. Evaluation of quality of life by comparing the desired status with current status could provide the right attitude for efficient manifestation of PTG. Almost all reviews on Audre Lorde mentions that her literary work is transformational. Obourn embarks to use the trauma theory to observe the changes in their linguistic features to understand their response to trauma (Obourn 2005). Trauma and post-trauma literature is not only cathartic to the writer who sublimates one's pain in the form of expressive writing, but also to the reader who might or might not have the resources to sublimate their own hurt. To that reader, books, movies, or even other artforms that represent or describe trauma feel like home, since in them, finally,

one's pain and suffering finds true resonance. They feel understood – a feeling that a person who suffers from trauma thirsts for, but can hardly, truly find.

1.4. Angelou and trauma

Angelou was born into trauma. She was born in a race that was already under subjugation. In addition to this, she was a woman and had to face and live through double oppression. Apart from this, the trauma of undergoing separation from her mother at the age of three, the humiliation of merely existing as a black girl, the inferiority complex of looking the way she did and the rape she underwent, became the core of her trauma and had a massive effect on most of her life.

In her autobiographies, Angelou presents a self that is constantly searching for herself – to discover and rediscover it, to accept it, to find itself a home. She juggles between jobs, people and continents even, to find a calm in herself – to find meaning. Despite the amount of resilience with she fought the odds life threw at her constantly, in one of the parts, she writes,

My head stayed high from habit, but my last hope was gone. Every way out of the maze had proved to be a false exit. My once lively imagination would not come up with one more fantasy. My courage was dwindling. Unfortunately, fortitude was not like the color of my skin, given to me once and mine forever. It needed to be resurrected each morning and exercised painstakingly. It also had to be fed with at least a few triumphs. My strength had fallen away from me as the pert features fade from an aging beauty.....
For the first time in my life I sat down defenseless to await life's next assault. (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 378)

Angelou constantly acknowledges every obstacle that life constantly throws at her, and recognises the need to rebuild herself. One of the most fascinating things about her written

works is the courage with which she tells her truth. In her interview with the *Black Camera*, she says,

I have tried to do in all of my work over the past 30 years is to tell the truth and to tell it eloquently. I've been careful about the facts, but the facts take a secondary role to the truth because facts can obscure the truth. You can tell so many facts that you never get to the truth. You can say the places where, the times when, the people who, the methods how, the reasons why, and never get to the truth. In all of my work, I have tried to say that and tell the truth. I think that readers and listeners and viewers see that and sense that I'm telling the truth. (*Black Camera*)

She does not hesitate before portraying her flaws, mistakes or any part of herself that may or may not align with her public image. She speaks about her darker past as loudly as she talks about the wrongs done to her. There is no veil, for she believed that, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you" (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*). She says,

All of my work, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith. While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated. In fact, that encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure. (Angelou qtd. in Wagner-Martin 9)

From growing up praying that however she was, was just an ugly dream, to accepting herself enough to speak and write seven long autobiographies about her life with not just blunt honesty but celebration of even unspeakable truths, Angelou's autobiographies are testimony to her growth as a writer but especially, as an individual.

Regardless of living through several traumatic events throughout her life, Maya Angelou found courage and strength in the creative arts. She is one of the most inspirational

individuals that the world was fortunate to witness. Emerging from the dark, swimming across turbulent oceans, she rose like dust to create an unforgettable history. Separated from her divorced parents at a young age, living in a racist environment, getting sexually assaulted, surviving broken marriages, living through pain and poverty and some, fortunately, short-lived compromising professions, surviving the agony of seeing her son meet with a devastating accident with a recovery process that was as slow and discouraging as it was, she thrived as a singer, dancer, producer, screen-play writer, actor, feminist, apartheid activist, and literary writer, apart from being a single mother.

1.5. Research Questions

Maya Angelou is one of the most loved and most popular writers of today's times. Her works and her life are an inspiration to the world. There has been a lot of research done on her works and her life. Researchers have dwelled on her cultural struggle. Her works have been analysed from a feminist point of view. There has been research on the theme of love and freedom in her works. However, Trauma Theory is a relatively new theory that emerged and got popularised in the 1990s. It was around the same time, that the concept of Post-Traumatic Growth emerged.

While Trauma Theory has been used in literary research, it is still new. There has been works done on the recovery from trauma based on Maya Angelou, there is a gap. There has been no research done on Maya Angelou, based primarily and critically based on the theory of Post-Traumatic Growth. It is this gap that this work would seek to fill.

This work seeks to answer: How is the invisible scar of racism evident in her works? How do her works showcase the fight of fiery "black" women in a patriarchal world? Are her works a sublimation of her trauma? How are PTSD and PTG different (with reference to Maya

Angelou)? How do her life and her works make her a symbol of post-traumatic growth? What signs does Maya Angelou show of having undergone a PTG?

1.6. Aims and Objectives

My work would discuss the profound effects of the incidents that became the root of her trauma. It would also discuss the journey of her post-traumatic growth, to rise above it all with grace and strength. It would deal with the individual and collective, cultural effects of the then African-American situation in brief, and would lay emphasis on the transformation of the self and identity of Angelou, through the various overwhelming external stimuli. It would attempt to discover how sexual assault, displacement and the then, prevalent cultural condition forged Maya Angelou into the inspiration she still is. It would study the historical trauma of the community in general and Maya Angelou in specific. It would study her language for detailed analysis of the effect in it, and the role that her assaulted femininity had in shaping her identity. While the work would focus on her autobiographies, it would also take references from her poems.

1.7. Conclusion

This work primarily seeks to trace her journey from her trauma as a member of the Black community, as a Black woman, and through her personal trauma that she underwent through her life. Angelou discusses and presents almost 40 years of her life in her autobiographies. While in the beginning of the first book, the readers are met with a little black girl who is trying to find live through the confusion her cultural existence, while coming to terms with her the struggles that come along with being a girl or a woman, the final work finds a woman who has not only almost transcended her physical insecurities, has come to accept herself for who she is, has come to accept her life and everything in it, but also dares to start writing everything down, to become the first every Black woman to present her life – the brightest and not so

bright parts, with the entire world as a means to not only find a cohesive narrative for herself, but to even teach the world that there is life beyond pain.

The next chapters would primarily focus on the how, in spite of the many challenges Angelou grows from being a timid victim to a flourishing symbol of the human spirit. The next two chapters would deal with two of the most important parts of her identity – her life, struggles and conquests as an African American, and as a woman. The third chapter deals with her identity as an artist and a writer, and how sublimation was a means for her to make sense and alleviate her past trauma. The final chapter and the conclusion would summarise her journey from trauma to post traumatic growth.

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Chapter II: Reading the “Black Past”: The Invisible Scar of Racism

2.1. Introduction

2.2. Tracing the pervasiveness of racism

2.2.1. The problem of racism in America

2.3. Presentation of Racism in Literature

2.4. Representation of Patriarchy in Literature by Black Women Writers

2.5. Angelou and the scar of racism

2.5.1. The inheritance of trauma and fear

2.5.2. Endeavours at coping with racist microaggressions

2.5.3. War without and within

2.6. Conclusion

2.1. Introduction

While this thesis seeks to study and examine the journey of Maya Angelou in specific, one cannot begin to understand it without understanding her cultural context and background. Angelou belonged to the African American community in America. This is an inseparable part of her identity and of her journey of becoming everything that she was. The personal trauma that she underwent also includes the cultural trauma she was born into and therefore to fully comprehend her, one must study this too.

The history of the world and therefore, the course of several lives - collectively and individually, have been shaped by ideas. While some ideas brought about incredible amounts of progress, there have been others which, in time, became the source of gathering power, by some sections of the society. History stands witness to the ravages that power has caused to nations, communities, societies and individuals. Whether it is the problem of* gender, of economic disparities, of political subjugation, or the construct of social hierarchies, power is the central motivation for most of the problems that the world finds itself in. While the flow of time sweeps away the prominent events, in many cases, its poisonous residue remains - lay buried in the ruins of generations, subtly veiled under convenient ideals, stereotypes or 'customs'.

It is the primary practice of all creatures to fight for power. Human civilisation has spent the last many centuries in a blind, persistent pursuit for power. The act of "othering" communities, nations and people, is essentially an attempt at achieving a status of power. The strategic segregation of the Dalit community in India, who were once, infamously called "the untouchables", is an act of "othering". It is unfortunate that several cases of communal brutality with relation to Dalits is still rampant. Apart from communities the idea of "otherness" continues to affect various genders too – the fight for equality of women, the LGBTQ

movement, the fight against patriarchy by men to get rid of the emotionally brutal hierarchy it brings about within the community of men in general. The “white-man’s burden” is another instance of labelling oneself as a more superior race in comparison to the “other”. As a matter of fact, almost every act of revolution on the social front is a fight for equality, and to be accepted as belonging to the primary community – humanity.

2.2. Tracing the pervasiveness of racism

The fight of equality has been an on-going crusade. From the silent attempts to live with human dignity to the civil wars, from the formation of the National Association for Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) to the outstanding and significant blossom of Black culture in the Harlem Renaissance, from the Black Art Movement of the 1960s and 1970s to the present decentralised revolution of Black Lives Matter, this community has been battling prejudice, stigmas, stereotypes, and discrimination.

Michael Foucault speaks of power as the essence that runs in the veins of human civilisation. He viewed it as the primary inspiration behind most human endeavours. Instead of perceiving it as a mere behavioural characteristic of human being, he viewed it as a strategic tool used to establish and maintain relationships, making both parties equally involved and invested in maintaining it for their personal benefits. Owing to this, he viewed it as a means to understand the various aspects that constitute the human world – gender, politics, social structures.

Power plays a dominant role in the establishment of social structures, hierarchies and therefore, social norms and regulations to maintain its balance. Different countries, communities, societies have given different names to similarly constructed sections of people. There are various events from the past, marked by relentless acquisition of power, which find a significant mention in history books as monumental symbols of human brutality. One of the

most significantly and crucially mentioned events, is that of the mass extermination in Germany under the ruthless reign of Adolf Hitler. Apart from that, years of discrimination faced by Dalits in India, and the era of slavery that was legally eradicated by Abraham Lincoln by means of the Emancipation Proclamation Bill in 1863, also stand testimony to the devious workings of such social structures. According to Foucault,

... is not primarily prejudice, discrimination, or ideology. Racism, on the one hand, operates within the boundaries of biopower insofar as it articulates a caesura between worthy and unworthy life; on the other hand, racism operates between different forms of power as a form of governmentality. (Foucault qtd. in Rasmussen 40)

Since religion has often played the foundational role in the building of some of the first belief systems of the world, some societies find their reason for these sectional differences and hierarchies in religious arguments. The Indian social structure finds its origin in the *Manusmriti*. This ancient text is considered, by the Hindus, as their 'Dharmasastra'. It is to the Hindus what Sharia is for Muslims, and the Church dogma is for the Catholic Christians. The direct translation of the word 'Manusmriti', is the reflection of Manu, or the codes of Manu. The text, which was written between 200 BC to 200 CE, is often attributed to Brahma – the creator in Hinduism, for its origin. According to the texts, it is believed that these ideas were passed on by Brahma Himself, to the first human – Manu, who then passes it on to the first teacher – Bhrigu, who then passes it on further to other sages. This work is looked at as the law book for the rules and codes of Hinduism.

Some theorists believe that one important factor that led to the division and stratification as mentioned in the *Manusmriti* is the Aryan Invasion. It is believed that when the Steppe Pastoralists from the grasslands of Afghanistan (the Aryans), invaded India from the North, most native inhabitants travelled southwards, or into the jungles. Those who stayed back, and were incorporated into the Aryan society. The Aryans thought of the indigenous people as culturally

and racially inferior and therefore, when they incorporated them into their system, they preferred to give them a socially lower rank. The *Manusmriti* came into existence after the Aryan invasion had already taken place. One could find the mention of the varna system in it.

It states how the Brahmins had emerged from the head of Brahma, the Kshatriyas had emerged from the shoulders of the Creator, the Vaishnavas, from the thighs, and the Shudras from the feet of the Lord. However, there was one section which was excluded from the four varnas of the Hindu society. This group of people came to form the fifth varna of this society. Since it was not mentioned in the scripture about the origin of this varna from the parts of the creator, they were excluded by the rest

There are several theories about who the Dalits are. There are different origin stories allotted to this community however, all most of these stories and narratives have one common foundational ground – the careful othering of this community and the placing them in the circle of “them”. Due to the theoretical aid that the Indian society has, the malpractice of social division, discrimination and subjugation of the lower varnas, especially the Dalits, remains a breathing evil.

The Nanjing Massacre that ensued in Nanjing, the then capital of China, by the Imperial Japanese Army was another atrocious event in the history of the world. The troops of Japan invaded Nanjing, which contained mostly inexperienced soldiers and civilians, captured it and sought to turn it into a symbol for the rest of China. It was a clever and domineering strategy to manipulate the rest of China into surrendering to them out of fear that if they did not, they would be met with the same fate.

While, on first glance, it might appear to be a political strategy with a political aim, this massacre had the conviction of being from a superior race than the Chinese at its root. About two decades of powerful propaganda had caused the Japanese to think of the Chinese as a race

inferior to theirs. Due to this, even during the capture of Nanjing two officials, namely, Toshiaki Mukai and Tsuyoshi Noda decided to contest with each other to see who would behead 100 soldiers first before the city was captured completely. Meanwhile, *Nichi Nichi Shimbun*, a newspaper in Tokyo published their progress in the colour of heroism. When, by the time Nanjing was captured and both the officials could not determine who had touched the mark first, they decided to extend the mark to beheading 150 Chinese. Even after the capture of the city, there were countless gory murders and executions. Apart from these, thousands of Chinese women were forced into sexual slavery, as the ‘comfort women’. The then capital of China – Nanjing, and the spirit of the people were shattered on the ground of racial superiority.

Another instance from history that portrays the heedless determination to exhort power, from the perspective of race and community, is the brutal extermination of Jews in the Nazi concentration camps was one of the most cold-blooded phases in recent history. World War II and the regime of Hitler remains etched as one of the worst onslaughts of power and egotism on humanity in general. Those years are perceived as standing drenched in the blood of millions of innocent lives. The event has become an unforgivable symbol of cultural and racial intolerance. The interviews, books and articles written by historians, but especially the survivors, reveals the gory reality of the time.

The Jews were stripped off their names, property, professions, life, and even their dignity. They were pushed into trains like cattle and were sent to the camps to live a life worse than nightmares, or to be executed in the gas chambers. In *Our Crime was Being Jewish* (2015), Wallace Witkowski, one of the survivors of the Nazi brutality, says,

My childhood essentially ended when the German armies marched into Poland on September 1, 1939. It is a very emotional date. I was eleven years old. Fear paralyzed many of us during the years of very brutal Nazi occupation, a feeling of total

helplessness in which there was not much we could do about it. (Pitch and Berenbaum 43).

While racism is an evil that is viewed with a constricted geographical view of particular nations or even communities through the prominent events in history, it is, in truth, spread across the globe and transcends any one community or nation or a particular phase in history. The human world and the society that it has constructed, has been further divided and subdivided into races, colours, communities, cultures, castes, genders, and more. The hierarchies and divisions in the world have created a need to feel “better than”, and the need to feel it even at the cost of the other.

The Indian society is segregated mainly, by means of casteism. The Nanjing Massacre was a result of the belief of the Japanese that they were of a superior race than the Chinese. The Nazi totalitarian regime, and the Jewish Holocaust was executed with similar beliefs and convictions. The Nazis were of the idea that they had descended from the Aryan race, and were therefore, of a superior blood. It is due to this that the symbol they chose to represent them was the swastika. The systemic racism in America that lasted beyond the Emancipation Proclamation Bill was passed and unfortunately, still exists by means of micro-aggression. However, these national identities also fall into different hierarchical positions on the global level.

Recent research has come to prove that America and its strategy of segregation and discrimination had a considerable amount of influence on several Nazi programs. In the book, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of the Nazi Race Law* (2017), James Q. Whitman states about how the Nazi's “most certainly were interested in learning from America. In fact, as we shall see (sic), it was the most radical Nazis who pushed most energetically for the exploitation of American models.” (Whitman 4). The Nazi leaders often

made references about the conquests of Americans on the West. The assassinations and executions of the Native Americans were looked at as a heroic and inspirational act. The segregation in America, the discrimination, the strategies of systemic oppression used in America, caused Nazi Germany to look at it as a “model”. In her work, *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson says,

...the American paradox of proclaiming liberty for all men while holding subsets of its citizenry in near total subjection... Germany well understood the U.S. fixation on race purity and eugenics, the pseudoscience of grading humans of presumed group superiority. (Wilkerson 79)

2.2.1. *The problem of racism in America*

Particularly, in the context of America, this problem has affected generations of the Black Community. The African American community has undergone years of collective trauma, due to the colour of their skin. It might be Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religions and Morals* (1773), Fredrick Douglas’ *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an English Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963), or Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), the perspectives keep shifting, the styles might vary, but the subject remains constant - the trauma deep rooted in the collective consciousness unfailingly resurfaces in their work.

From the blatant, once prevalent practice of slavery to brutal segregation, to the heinous act of lynching, to the veiled discrimination of the present day, and the ceaseless cases of race related killings continue to disrupt the social balance and therefore, harmony of America as a nation. Initially, the “slaves” were dehumanised through the term “negro”, and then “the blacks”. The colour of their skin, their texture of their hair, their language, their accent and

style of speaking the English language came to be not just mocked but lampooned. Gradually, however, the community stopped being a victim of their derogatory badges and wore it with pride. They grew to embrace their tag as their title, and called themselves as the Black community.

America stands tall on the long history of capture, seizure, executions and murders of the Native Americans, also called the Red Skinned, and the slavery and discrimination of the Blacks and the Browns, and yet claims its primary ideals to be those of equality, opportunity and inclusivity. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French writer had once observed that only the “surface of American society is covered with a layer of democratic paint” (Wilkerson 79). While time has caused the major events to fade into history, there are various segregationist symbols that still remain a part of an everyday American life. The confederate flag, also known as the ‘rebel flag’ or the ‘Southern Cross’, even partially, or symbolically, still remains a part of the state flags of Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi. In the celebratory moment in American history when slavery was drawing to a close, legally, several southern states were challenging this with the intention of the preserving their southern distinctiveness.

On 21st March, 1861, Alexander H. Stephens delivered an impromptu speech, as the Vice-President of the Confederacy, which proclaimed that the ““cornerstone” of southern greatness lay in slavery and white supremacy” (Harrold ed. 59). In his speech, he further argues that “the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race – is his natural and normal condition...” (61), and that the then government was “attempting to make things equal that the Creator had made unequal” (62).

The Emancipation Proclamation Bill which was passed on January 1, 1863, declared that “all persons held as slaves... shall be then, henceforward, and forever be free”

(“Emancipation Proclamation”) However, even after a 100 years later, when, James Baldwin published his important work, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), things had essentially, remained the same. In this work, Baldwin says,

Negroes in this country – and, Negroes do not strictly or legally speaking, exist in any other – are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world. This world is white and they are black. White people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks (intrinsically, that is: God decreed it so), and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared. Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it. (Baldwin 30)

While the law had been repealed on the level of the government and legislatively, all the Blacks had been ordained as free and equal, it had nothing to do with the ideas that caused the act in the first place. Slavery was soon replaced by blatant and unfettered discrimination, based on colour.

2.3. Presentation of Racism in Literature

The need for evaluation of available literature for contents representing prejudice against colored people is gaining attention. It is also being analysed in children and youth’s literature in order to improve the socialisation experiences. Most part of European racial undertones are associated with the traditional dichotomy between good and bad represented with colour symbolism of white and black respectively Becker (1973) Rii.1. Victorian literature has multitude of racial references ranging from casual racism to extreme. Casual racism can be perceived as gratuitous in nature. For example, Ellen Wood’s character in *East Lynne* (1861) is described as “with a Jew’s eye” (Betensky 2019). Presence of this slur may not be obvious

or deliberate to everyone however, it does not make it valid and is anti-semitic. Such casual racism can be seen in novels from 19th centuries in American and European literature.

Alice Walker's novels have numerous racial stereotyping where the black female characters are portrayed to struggle for emancipation and exploration of taboo (Bizwas 2021). Her novels projected black women as perverse, sexually wanton and irresponsible individuals. However, in 1990s, there was a change in her works which draw divergent criticisms. In her novel *The Temple of My Familiar*, the black woman character Zede pens her experience at a prison-village in south America as follows:

The guards forced the women to mate with them, and before long each guard had chosen his favorite slave "wife." The one who chose me did not force me, but bided his time. He was someone who beat and burned and killed without emotion and remorse, yet still managed to cling to the belief that someone would want to sleep with him without the use of force. It was a matter of pride to him. (Walker 2004)

The casual racism here indicates the internalization of long-standing stereotyped beliefs. In the above passage from the novel, the black women undergoing sexual abuse is being justified by vaguely suggesting that these women enjoyed the company of the white guards. In *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of class, race and colonialism in the works of Charles Dickens* by Grace Moore discusses about the genocidal thoughts, racial, imperialistic and class based discriminations in Charles Dicken's works (Nayder 2006; Moore 2004). Dickens has been ridiculed for considering few races as inferior and savage, including the Irish. It is important for literature to be scrutinized for casual racism and to be highlighted as a cause for helping the readers understand the internalized racial thoughts and views.

2.4. Representation of Patriarchy in Literature by Black Women Writers

Black women were subjected to face both patriarchy and racism together for being a women and black. Black women writers often narrate their struggle against patriarchy and patriarchal racism that is rooted deeply in centuries-long racist oppression and gender-based violence including slavery, rape, forced motherhood, infanticide, concubinage, physical and mental abuse. Their struggles spanned over decades on impediments in education and employment opportunities. In 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl', Harriet Jacobs emphasises the ordeals of slavery for a women by saying "When they told me my new-born was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever beenbefore. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women".

Nobel and Pulitzer winning writer Toni Morrison's first book titled "The bluest eye" was a story about oppression against women. Her works are known to deconstruct and challenge the foundation of the patriarchal and sexist philosophies by portraying women who have a never-say-die attitude (Tiambei, 2022) Riii.4. Another well-known black woman writer, Bell Hooks wrote several books, such as *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and Feminism*, extensively incorporating black women stereotypes thus throwing light on the methods and strategies of racism and patriarchy. Hooks generalized four stereotyped images of black women namely: i) Loyal and docile mammy – used to normalize use of black women for domestic service, ii) Provocative Jezebel – diverting attention from sexual violence to victim blaming black women, iii) Manipulative and aggressive matriarch – justifying the inequality in social structure, and iv) Lazy and irresponsible welfare mother – targets for blame on economic and moral problems.

During the Harlem Renaissance (1918-1937), revival of black culture in creative arts, the works of many black female writers focussed on constructing their unique identities in a white-dominated and male-dominated society (Xu, 2021) Riii.2. One such novel by Zora Neale Hurston titled *Their Eyes were Watching God* portrays a black woman Janie and her story of

three marriages. She painted the characters of black women as fighters to break the traditional image of black women as nannies and sluts in the eyes of white people. Similarly, black writer Paule Marshall was one of the first to use the theme of rebirth or act of recreating oneself through a specific ritual (Marshall, 1929; Washington, 1981) Riii.1. Other noteworthy characters of black women without presence of men, in novels by black women include Vyry (in Margaret Walker's Jubilee), Marle (in Marshall's The Chosen Place, the Timeless People), Avey Johnson (in Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow), Pilate and Circe (in Morrison's Song of Solomon), Sula and Nel (in Morrison's Sula) to name a few (Ogunyemi 1985).

2.5. Angelou and the scar of racism

Even as a little child, not only did Angelou witness how her race had become accustomed to dehumanising humiliation, she was also shocked to realise that despite being a force of nature, even her magnificent grandmother was no different. She realised and despised the fear that had become such an integral part of their identity and in little ways of her own, began to fight it back since a very little age. As she grew older, instead of merely fighting it, she accepted the truth first and even dared to tell it as it was. It is due to this that her first autobiography remains one of the most banned books in the United States due to its open and explicit portrayals of racism and sexual abuse. However, this only validates the confident acceptance of her past and the boldness with which she was ready to present the truth before the world.

By the point in time when Angelou was in Stamps, America had already witnessed the Emancipation Proclamation. It had witnessed the illegalisation of slavery. However, even though the law had sought to brought in a certain level of relief to the Black Community, discrimination was on the rise. It was during the same time that not just America but the world lived the horrid years of the Great Depression. The unemployment rates had risen greatly. The

Black community were the first in America to face the brunt of this economic crisis. This period is also distinct because its rampant and normalised practice of segregation and lynching.

Kali Tal, in his *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), speaks of how to truly comprehend the literature of trauma, one must understand the history and origin of the author. She talks about how a literature of trauma springs from the need to tell and retell one's story; to testify the ordeals one or one's community underwent. However, she raises questions as to who a 'trauma survivor' is. The comprehension of trauma in such literature, she argues, lies in the context of the trauma – collective trauma.

In her autobiographies, especially in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Maya describes her grandmother, Annie Henderson as a woman of strength and power. In an age of Economic Depression and inhuman segregation, hers was the only store which was owned and run by a Black in that entire region. As Maya narrates, in her first autobiography, this privilege did not make her immune to the torturous insults shot at her by the whites of the region, especially their children, who would come to her to satisfy their sadistic urge to mindlessly abuse her. She writes, how,

In Stamps, the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that, they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed. (Angelou 24)

It was a place where lynching and barbaric beatings were sadly considered to be an everyday reality. Maya recounts how her Uncle Willy had "moaned the whole night through as if he had, in fact, been guilty of some heinous crime" (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 19) after witnessing the brutal assault of lynching that another Black had been

experienced to. The description of her uncle dreaming of such a situation befalling him is a clear sign of PTSD from the deep-rooted fear of being robbed of one's dignity as a human and of being met with such an insulting death.

Maya could not contemplate of whites as people, she affirmed people were "those who lived in my side of town" (24). Young Maya Angelou lived with fear of terrifying lynch mobs and the daily demonstration of discrimination and humiliation. Every racially charged incident adds to Maya's self-awareness and helps her develop strong views about injustice. She goes on to narrate the incidents where her brother witnesses white men joking while fishing the rotting corpse of a lynched black man out of the river. Another incident occurred where her grandmother was humiliated by a group of poor white girls.

Maya grew up in an environment where the essentials of being treated as another human being – respect and dignity, for Blacks was astonishing. Maya quotes incidents from the unfortunately usual insults that her dear grandmother would often undergo. The effect of the awareness that she had been left in such a dreaded pit by her mother, only intensified her pain. Maya was a child but was terribly aware of the condition of her people, and yet, she recalls how in spite of it all, Stamps but particularly her grandmother was her home.

In the lives of Black children, racism is a "reality based and repetitive trauma" (Daniel 126) that scars them for life. In several cases, this trauma could have health implications. While Angelou did survive it as she grew older, the scar never left her. In *Letter to My Daughter*, Angelou writes,

I believe that one can never leave home. I believe that one carries the shadows, the dreams, the fears and dragons of home under one's skin, at the extreme corners of one's eyes and possibly in the gristle of the ear lobe. (Angelou *Letter to My Daughter*)

In an interview Oprah Winfrey mentions how she had seen Angelou throw people out of her house for cracking a single racist joke. Angelou was convinced that “negative had power” (“Oprah Interviews Maya Angelou”) and that if it was allowed to remain in the house, “Those negative words climb into the woodwork and into the furniture, and the next thing you know they'll be on my skin” (“Oprah Interviews Maya Angelou”).

2.5.1. *The inheritance of trauma and fear*

In her work, *Caste* (2020), Isabel Wilkerson talks about the moral dilemma that the parents of the African American community often go through. She says that the conflict includes the question of when they should inform their children about the brutality of their existence, and whether they should tell them and prepare them for the whips of fate and discrimination or let them celebrate their existence before it is met with the ruthless shadow of prejudice. She says,

... Maybe the most loving thing to do is to wait, wait until something happens, somebody drops the n-word on him at the playground or a teacher checks him for running down the hall but not his white schoolmates, and he knows it's wrong and wants to know why. (Wilkerson 209)

In *Worlds of Hurt* (1996), Kali Tal writes, “Bearing witness is an aggressive act” (Tal 5). She says, that it brings forward their urge to “embrace conflict rather than conformity” (5). A person who comes across an event – it might be as a victim or a witness, reacts to that particular event, based on their personal history of emotional connections, of the inclinations that they might have developed through their life as a conscious or unconscious reaction to those connections or events, and their personal levels of resilience. However, often, when one witnesses a traumatic event befalling someone or a group that one identifies with, the effects could organically pass over to them too. Cultural trauma is collective trauma that is often

intergenerational and continues to haunt the particular nation, community or race in the form of their unconscious memory.

Transgenerational trauma, also called intergenerational trauma or multigenerational trauma or cross-generational trauma, is closely related to collective trauma and cultural trauma. It could involve a trauma response from an entire ethnic community or race, to the humiliation or atrocities committed by another race or ethnic community. In his research, Vamik D. Volkan, says that one form of transgenerational trauma involves

...the depositing of an already formed self or object image into the developing self-representation of the child under the premise that there it can be kept safe and the resolution of the conflict with which it is associated can be postponed until a future time. The 'deposited image' then becomes like a psychological gene that influences the child's identity. (Volkan 86)

With newer discussions in literary critical theory, and the rise and growth of postmodernism and deconstruction, new spaces for growth and acceptance of individual and personal perspectives and experiences have found recognition and space to exist. In the Foucauldian perspective, subjectivity is one of the effects of the shifting discourse of power. This has given rise to discussions and conversations about creating a more integrated and inclusive world. The same is also responsible for the growing interest in various areas of study – be it studies of gender, class, race or trauma. While they are different fields of study, they have one core intention – to understand and celebrate diversity, provide spaces for individual identities and experiences, and necessitate more inclusivity. The ideal at the core of any of these studies is empathy.

One primary inspiration for Angelou, in the middle of her feeling abandoned by her parents, and the merciless whips of discrimination and powerlessness she felt even as a child, was her grandmother - Annie Henderson, who she dearly called 'Momma'. For Angelou, her grandmother stood for power, pride and loftiness. In her work, she describes her as someone who stands tall at the face of everything with courage as a fierce woman with a strong faith in God and loyalty and love for her community.

At a very young age, Angelou had to witness her personality, her work and her magnificence get humiliated, not just by the adults of the community that was holding them in subjugation, but even by the children of that community. Since the transgenerational trauma of the African American community is based on power relations, and since the existence of a power relation depends on the active involvement of both groups, the effect would be shared by both - either in the form of trauma, or prejudice. The misfortune incident with the "powhitetrash" girls establishes this, while also highlighting the personal trauma that little Angelou underwent because of it. In her work, Angelou calls this incident to have "the most painful and confusing experience" (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 26) that she ever had with her grandmother. Later in the same chapter, she says, "I suppose my lifelong paranoia was born in those cold, molasses-slow minutes" (27)

Angelou writes about how the young women from the closest white neighbourhood would come to her grandmother's store and take liberties to crawl through shelves and bins - liberties that even Angelou could not take, in spite of it being her grandmother's domain. The act is truly that of trespassing one's private space. However, the recklessness with which the "powhitetrash" girls rummaged the place for fun, was a way of establishing a deep sense of authority - one that is grounded on the basis of only colour and race.

It is interesting to note the words she uses to describe the incident. She talks about how Grandmother Henderson and Uncle Willie “obeyed”, “followed their order” (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 26). She calls the girls “playful apparitions” (26). While, when looked at objectively, it is only some mischievous white children, the impact they had on Angelou was that of “apparitions” - this sprang from her inability to make logical arguments to their action, the alarm it caused her to watch her idol and her strength turning into stone despite the humiliating mischief and a deep sense of shock and fear for even herself. The careless audacity with which they called Grandmother Henderson by her name, disturbed her. She says,

“Naw, Annie...” - to Momma? Who owned the land they lived on? Who forgot more than they would ever learn? If there was any justice in the world, God should strike them dumb at once! (Angelou *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 26)

While trauma studies discusses and proposes to study and understand trauma as an individual and subjective experience, it also embraces the idea of trauma that might affect an entire group, community or nation. The African American identity, slavery and racism fall under this premise. In the critical essay, “Racial Protest, Identity, Words and Form in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” (1995), Pierre A. Walker speaks about how most of literature that was originally written by the African Americans as a means to prove their existence as humans to those who claimed to have been decreed by God, to be of a race superior to theirs, and who, due to this had guiltlessly taken the role of being their ‘possessors’ – the whites. Later, however, he says, it slowly became a means of making a political statement by creating the ‘high art’ that is usually considered to be the measure of highest achievement for a civilisation.

In *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), Angelou writes about an instance when a white clerk violated her existence as another equal human with heedless insults, in a commonplace situation. When, by accident, they kept stepping before each other in an attempt to move past, Angelou was faced with a condescending command – “You stand still and I’ll pass you” (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 292). While Angelou specifically mentions that the clerk said it with a long face, but a smile, it becomes unavoidably clear to the reader that the intention of the clerk was to reproach Angelou for her courage to attempt to be an equal in a situation that could easily be dismissed as an ‘unnecessary debate’. The power relations one establishes and upholds finds deeper roots when it percolates into the everyday process of socialisation and becomes indistinguishable from the primary or ‘natural’ behavioural patterns of a person or a group.

The world lay in shambles because of the number of divides that have been constructed in it. The ecological divide separates man from the other species. The racial divide, separates races among humankind. The nationalistic divide separates one nation from another. There lies an economic divide, the gender divide and so on. All of these, stand on one or the other “level” in the global hierarchy.

Angelou is taken aback by the command, she wonders if the clerk did not notice or could not acknowledge her position there, which was not that of a servants’. She makes an attempt to uplift her immediate power position by snapping back, but in vain. The episode is an example of the micro-aggression that a lot of members of the minority communities or groups undergo. These behaviours have been normalised through time. While, on the surface it might look like there has been a corrosion of power struggles as these through time, due to the dissolution of these events through law, their effects are long-lasting. These power patterns have percolated through generations and have become a part of the socialisation process;

become a part of the everyday behaviour patterns of people, and this, though might look apparently harmless, is a more poisonous version.

Trauma or hurt can cause a person or a community to conform to a certain way of living, particularly if the traumatic event persists for long, causing the person or the group to live with it for long, or if the trauma is transgenerational. This conformity comes from a habitual way of existence. Appropriate adaptation is a way of adapting to trauma, as a means to survive it - as an individual, as a community, or as a race. The French psychologist and psychotherapist - Pierre Janet called these adaptations as “automatisms”, wherein “most experiences, values, habits, and innate and acquired skills are automatically integrated into existing cognitive schema” (Kolk and Hart 1531).

The clerk had reduced her identity to that of an object, and had caused Angelou to feel “rootless, nameless, pastless” (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 293) with only “two white blurs” (293) buoying before her. An everyday, commonplace, habitual prejudice exhibited by the two whites brings forth the reality of how pervasive the problem of racism lay. However, what pained and traumatised Angelou, like always, was the passive acceptance, and maybe, even subservience of her towering and usually, formidable grandmother - Annie Henderson. This passive acceptance is a response to the generational conditioning that her was a part of. Crawford had once written that “the conceptual and linguistic resources of the dominant culture logically construct shame as a primary aspect of black subjects’ rhetoric of emotion” (Bump 153). In his article, Jerome Bump says, that the idea of guilt springs from the feeling that one has made a mistake. However, when one feels shame, it is because somehow, they think and believe, that they are the mistake.

In the autobiography, Angelou recounts the horror of seeing power, and life drain from her ‘Momma’ when she hears about the “downtown showing (sic) out” (Angelou, *Collected*

Autobiographies of Maya Angelou 294). Angelou is taken aback when she is greeted with two slaps for standing up for herself and her community with courage and dignity. Instead of sharing the glorious moment of victory, ‘Momma’ gifts her with distance as a means to protect her, by pushing her off the geographical space which would, she knew, hound her with the intention of forcefully making her regret having stood up against their violation of her and her community. She is sent to California. In the work, she painfully describes how “the greatest hurt was that she did not ask to hear her (sic) story” (294).

The anxiety, fear and the instinct to protect oneself that ‘Momma’ exhibits comes from a generational conditioning of living under oppression. While writing about the unavoidable effect that racism has on the families and particularly children of the African American families, in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), James Baldwin states,

Effort made by the child’s elders to prepare him for a fate from which they cannot protect him causes him secretly, in terror, to begin to wait, without knowing that he is doing so, his mysterious and inexorable punishment. He must be ‘good’ not only in order to please his parents and not only to avoid being punished by them; behind their authority stands another, nameless and impersonal, infinitely harder to please, and bottomless cruel. (Baldwin 31)

The brutal condition of slavery that continued to exist in America and the generational impact it caused on Africans and African Americans condition them generationally to live in a culture of fear. Even historically, even the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation by then president of America Abraham Lincoln did not, or could not uproot this evil from its roots. While legally slavery had been banned, which itself was a revolutionary act, the practise found a newer means to exist. Discrimination and segregation continued to exist rather openly in the society. Therefore, since the African American still looked at themselves at the others and often

inferior rank, their culture of fear continued to tie them in chains. Their instinct to protect themselves and their loved ones, particularly their children, continued to exist.

Grandmother Henderson belonged to a long, long culture of fear and subjugation, and while she was a fiery woman who had dared to live with honour and was respected for it, she had accepted the practicalities of existence and had given in to the generational practise of acceptance of their Fate. Her instinct to protect her granddaughter Springs from the understanding of a possible consequence which he had assumed to be natural due to air conditioning. To see her granddaughter revolt, Jules heard back into memories of brutality which she may have faced, witnessed, or heard through all the years of our existence.

In her first autobiography, Angelou speaks about how proud she was of Grandmother Henderson being the only 'Negro woman' in Stamps being called 'Mrs.' It is only later, that the readers realise that the judge had called her so, in an attempt to mock her own perception of herself. Mrs. Henderson was ordered to meet the judge in the court, since it had been revealed that she had given refuge to a Black man, who was being hunted down, due to the allegation of assault on White womanhood. In fear and panic, he had run to Mrs. Henderson's Store hoping to be given refuge. Mrs. Henderson had let him stay until night. However, he was later arrested and taken to court, where he confessed about the help Mrs. Henderson had offered him. When she appeared before the judge and was asked for her name, she called her "Mrs. Henderson". This was treated as a joke by the judge and the whites in the audience, who thought it a comical anomaly for a Black woman to even imagine that she could equal the whites - white women, in particular, with that honourable, social designation.

The extent of segregation and discrimination is sometimes, so acute, that the divide between communities is preserved through several marks of inferiority; sometimes, the lack of any mark of superiority - status or success. During the prime of the casteist or racist divide,

members of the subjugated community were not even allowed to wear certain dresses. The very fact that Mrs. Henderson's perception of herself - of being an honourable woman was scorned at, resonates with this prejudice. However, it is interesting to note how, in spite of the treatment that she was meted with, for her audacity to call herself "Mrs.", it was a moment that proved her "worth and majesty" (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 41) to the Black community. The very fact that she had dared to call herself and equal, and that the judge had pronounced her name as "Mrs. Henderson", even as a joke, was a step that she has taken, not just for herself, but even for her community, as a whole.

The dark history of America includes the existence of white supremacist terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. It was originally founded in 1866 by six confederate soldiers who called it the "Circle". The word was then translated into the Greek "KyKlos", which underwent further development and eventually became "Ku Klux" or the "Ku Klux Klan". The group is popularly referred to as the KKK. The group soon grew in number and became an oath bound society. The secrecy, the rituals and the passwords that the group used, bonded its members as a unified group. The group posed a resistance to the Reconstruction that the civil wars had sought to achieve. However, unlike other groups, instead of attempting to resist it by means of political debates or rallies, or by means of economic and social movements as such, it sought the means of terror and violence. While the group continued to fade and reappear from time to time, since its inception, due to various political and social causes, the idea persisted.

The movie, "The Birth of a Nation", directed by D.W. Griffith, was an adaptation of the book by Thomas Dixon, by the name *Clansmen*. The work was released in 1915. The work garnered a lot of acclaim for its technical innovations; however, it was criticised for its portrayal of the KKK in a positive light. The work portrayed the emancipated Black men as murderous

and dangerous for white women. While the KKK was portrayed as a group which aimed at protecting whites and white women from this, by means of their ways. While the work is criticised tremendously by critics, it had inspired the re-emergence of the then fading KKK.

The group, with time, evolved in its ways, to become more of a symbol. They grew into an anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, anti-Darwin, anti-urban group, along with being anti-Black. Their use of masks, and costumes, transformed them, from being a group of individuals to a faceless idea that was notoriously popular for its brutal use of terror and fear. In the first few pages of the first chapter of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* there is a mention of how Uncle Willie seeks to hide and is hidden in a garbage bin by grandmother Henderson due to the fear of the KKK. She speaks of the terrifying sound of the “horse’s hoofs... loudly thudding the ground” (Angelou 19) which alarmed Mrs. Henderson into blowing out the coal-oil lamps. The KKK had instilled so much fear that people were readily prepared to wipe off any signs of their existence, to survive another day.

In the chapter, Angelou mentions them as “the boys” (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 18) “with cemented faces and eyes of hate” (18). She speaks about the unforgettable sense of fear that she observed in her grandmother’s voice when she asked her to tell Uncle Willie to “lay low” (18) because there was a rumour that a “crazy nigger messed with a white lady.... Some of the boys’ll be coming over here later (sic)” (18).

Angelou does not speak from about the atrocities that the group committed, but rather, about the fear that they had instilled in the members of the communities that they stood against. She does not speak of it from a point of totality. Instead, she speaks of the psychological manifestation of that fear, that she had seen, and seen in her own family, and felt within herself. She speaks about how “even after the slow drag of years” (Angelou, *Collected*

Autobiographies of Maya Angelou 18) she still remembered the “fear which my (sic) mouth with hot, dry air, and made my body light” (18).

In the chapter, Angelou recalls how, knowing, that it was commonplace for Black men, who heard that the Klan was approaching, to “scurry under the houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear” (19) Later, in the same section, she speaks of how Uncle Willie and the man who was fleeing from the Klan, had to hide in a vegetable bin all night, to evade being found and lynched mercilessly by them.

Grandmother Henderson’s personal experience, the awareness of her surrounding her constant existence in an environment of segregation, discrimination, terror and fear, and the relentless and guiltless existence of such violent supremacist groups around them causes her to stand, petrified at the imagination of a possibility of such brutality landing on her dear granddaughter. It is due to this, that when she encounters her granddaughter refusing to obey the customary dictum of conformity and subservience to the Whites, and in place of it, when she witnessed the outrageous courage, she carried in herself to stand up against them, in nervous temper, she tells her,

You think ‘cause you’ve been to California these crazy people won’t kill you? You think them lunatic cracker boys won’t try to catch you in the road and violate you? You think because of your all-fired principle some of the men won’t feel like putting their white sheers on and riding over here to stir up trouble? You do, you’re wrong.”
(Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 294)

Instead of being proud of her, like Angelou had expected her to be, Mrs. Henderson sent her back to California, the same afternoon. It is interesting to note the subtle transference

of fear from one generation to the next, in this incident. The fear of Mrs. Henderson commands and controls the courage that burned in Angelou.

Transgenerational trauma was first discovered in 1966 in an attempt to understand the long-standing symptoms of trauma in the survivors of the Jewish Holocaust and their families. In the 2017 cinematic attempt to envision James Baldwin unfinished project *Remember This House* - the Raoul Peck directed movie, *I am Not Your Negro* (2016), one would find James Baldwin strongly stating that “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history” (*I am Not Your Negro* 1:26:32-1:26:43). When survivors of long-standing brutality have children, oftentimes, those children become witnesses of their trauma. A family is a conglomeration of ideals, values and a culture that are shared among the parents through, what Freud calls, transference, and among parents and children, through the process of mostly unconscious transmission. After the research that was done, on those families - the survivors of the Jewish Holocaust, it was concluded that

Children of such families, although remembering their parents’ and lost families’ war histories “only in bits and pieces,” attested to the constant psychological presence of the Holocaust at home, verbally or nonverbally, or in some cases, reported having absorbed the omnipresent experience of the Holocaust through “osmosis”. (Danieli 5)

The fear that lurked under Mrs. Henderson found a way of transferring memories of those who had already been subject to the inexplicable results of their courage to stand or even make the mistake of being found in the way of a white individual, onto her granddaughter when she found her standing before the white clerk, trying to assert her existence and her identity. Yael Danieli, an important name in the study of transgenerational trauma says,

The family is a carrier of conscious and unconscious values, myths, fantasies, and beliefs that may not be shared by the larger community or culture. Yet the role of the family as vehicle for intergenerational transmission of core issues of living and of adaptive and maladaptive ways of defining and coping with them may vary among cultures. The awareness of the possibility of pathogenic intergenerational processes and the understanding of the mechanisms of transmission should contribute to our finding effective means for preventing their transmission to succeeding generations. (Danieli 9)

It has been understood that psychological trauma could have two possible results – either the survivor would grow to become steeped into a pit of despair, lose faith, and hope in things around one and in oneself, or grow out of it stronger with a more resilience at the face of negativity. However, research has determined that the crucial factor that determines this difference is the environment one finds, post-trauma. However, in case of a trauma that stretches through centuries and has still not faded away, the members of the community that lay subjugated find no clear escape, and therefore remained trapped in themselves and in their communities with the memories of the painful past and the results that that past has come to have on their present, dreading all the while that their children they have borne would live the same, unavoidable fate as them. There is another fear too, however – “a fear that the child, in challenging the white world’s assumptions, was putting (sic) himself in the path of destruction” (Baldwin 31), and therefore, they unconsciously transmit an entire culture of fear and obedience to their children. This, in turn,

...filters into the child’s consciousness through his parents’ tone of voice as he is being exhorted, punished, or loved; in the sudden, uncontrollable note of fear heard in his mother’s or father’s voice when he strayed beyond the same particular boundary.... He

reacts to the fear in the parents' voices because his parents hold up the world for him and he has no protection without them. (31)

One of the ways in which this fear is passed over to the next generation, is through the unconscious transmission of how the community of the oppressors and the oppressed are different. Physical features are a significant element that establishes this difference in the psyche of the members of both the groups. The idea of beauty, like any other idea establishing and concretising the social hierarchy, is a human construct. The idea, that the white skin, smooth, silky hair and a leaner body structure is beautiful, is an idea that the world has inherited from a history of worshipping the oppressors and colonisers. When children grow to become aware of these differences, and learn to differentiate their physical features to that of another group or community or nation, that is when the social divisions begin to grow roots within them. In the work, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning", while writing about collective and cultural trauma, Gilad Hirschberger writes:

For victims of collective trauma meaning is established by: (a) passing down culturally-derived teachings and traditions about threat that promote group preservation; (b) these traditions of threat amplify existential concerns and increase the motivation to embed the trauma into a symbolic system of meaning; (c) trauma fosters the sense of a collective self that is transgenerational thereby promoting a sense of meaning and mitigating existential threat; (d) the sense of an historic collective self also increases group cohesion and group identification that function to create meaning and alleviate existential concerns; (e) the profound sense of meaning that is borne out of collective trauma perpetuates the memory of the trauma and the reluctance to close the door on the past; (f) Over time collective trauma becomes the epicenter of group identity, and

the lens through which group members understand their social environment.
(Hirschberger 2)

In the first few pages of the work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou writes about how she was probably living a “black ugly dream” (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 8). She, as a child, unable to see beauty in who she is, believed the fabrication that the narrative around her has strongly established – that Black was not beautiful, but was rather ugly. She believed that the true essence of perfection lay in being a person of white skin, eyes that were light blue. The confident misconception that Maya projects in her words, presents the gruesome reality of beauty standards that are racially specific. Beauty is a subjective idea, which has been concretised by means of convenience and dominance as a subtle means of establishing the power hierarchy, since definitions of beauty have for long, been not just an aesthetic feature but a rather political one. Baldwin, in his seminal publication, says, “Colour is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political one” (Baldwin 88).

In the autobiography, one would find little Maya, convinced of her natural ugliness, as against the beauty of the race of her subjugators. She takes refuge in her imagination, to find relief, by hoping that she is living just an ugly dream, and that, one day, she would wake up to her beautiful, long, blonde hair and her blue eyes, and would be the object of envy of everyone who had dared to imagine that she was the black girl, that she, in reality, was. She says,

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke up out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blonde, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light—blue eyes were going to hypnotise them.... I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with

nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil. (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 8)

It is interesting to note how she mentions how one might be “understandably jealous” of such a beauty. The deep-rooted psychological insecurity that Maya assumes to be a natural and logical response to the lack of such features – factors that allow one to look or feel beautiful, is a result of the internalisation of a history of racial subjugation. The idea that the masters or the oppressors or the colonisers are the ideal goal to reach in terms of their mannerisms or their choice of clothes or their physical appearance, springs from the need to feel like them – to feel powerful, as against the crippling fear and diffidence of being who they are. Beauty and its definition are subjective. It is relative to the person who must decide if it is. The same object, person or idea could arouse an immense aesthetic pleasure on one person, another person might not view it as anything close to beautiful. As the philosopher, David Hume, had written:

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. (Hume 230)

The problem however, lies, in the concretisation of a narrow idea of beauty that conveniently empowers one race or community and invalidates the other. This idea of domination through set standards of beauty goes beyond one specific community of group. It is a global point of dissension that has affected people across all genders and ages.

This power relation, which is based, purely on one's external appearance – here, primarily colour, is also evident in the work, in the episode when the author describes her eighth-grade graduation day. She narrates how, it was considered a matter of honour that a white man would come to address their school. The white men, who arrive, are considered and due their conditional understanding, are naturally assumed to be entitled to receive their wordless respect. One of the white men, as the author describes, goes to the speaker's platform, while the other, casually, and heedlessly, goes over to the centre seat and sits on it. In the sentence that follows, Angelou talks about how, it was the seat of the principal of their school and that, he was already sitting there when the white man approached that seat, with a casual authority. While describing the episode, Angelou never speaks of the principal who had got up to gift his seat to a man, only because he belonged to the white community.

There was a difference in the schools that the white children went to, as against the one in which the black children went. This difference lay from the infrastructure of the school, to the teachers they had and their necessary qualifications, to the low expectations from education itself, and the restricted but only bright future that the educated system promised the black students and the black community itself. In the work, Angelou talks about how “many teachers in Arkansas Negro school had only that diploma and were licensed to impart wisdom” (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 133). While talking about the infrastructure of her school there, she says,

Unlike the white high school, Lafayette County Training School distinguished itself by having neither lawn, nor hedges, nor tennis court, nor climbing ivy. Its two buildings ... were set on a dirt hill with no fence to limit either its boundaries or those of bordering farms. (132)

While this could be contended as a result of an economic difference, the effort spent in keeping this difference intact, is what is truly problematic in this scenario. The very fact the eighth-grade graduation was a matter of pride for the community, showcases the difficult truth about the education system that they were provided with. The conventionality with which Angelou writes, “only a small percentage will (sic) go to college” (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 132), points out at the stark reality of the economic and social condition that lived in, at the time.

James Baldwin had once mentioned how, at the age of fourteen he had become painfully aware of the reality that had awaited him. He speaks how he became cognizant of the gruesome reality he had always noticed around him, “not as a possibility but as the only possibility” (Baldwin 27). He speaks about how the power imbalance that surrounded them was his only reality, at the time. “They had the judges, the juries, the shotgun, the law – in a word, power” (28). This is restated by Angelou, when she speaks about how even the one’s who would make it to college, would only go to the agricultural and mechanical schools,

...which train Negro youths to be carpenters, farmers, handymen, masons, maids, cooks and baby nurses. The future rode heavily on the shoulders, and blinded them to the collective joy that had pervaded the lives of the boys and girls in the grammar school graduating class. (132)

The historian, Bertram Doyle, wrote, “Negroes are seldom, if ever, put into authority over white persons. Moreover, the Negro expects to remain in the lower ranks; rising, if at all, only over other Negroes” (qtd. in Wilkerson). This can be seen in the adoration that Angelou’s parents receive in Stamps, especially in the eyes of little Angelou. In the work, Angelou writes, “Everyone could tell from the way he talked and from the car and clothes that he was rich and maybe had a castle out in California. (I later learned that he had been a doorman at Santa

Monica's plush Breakers Hotel)" (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 46). This is also true with regard to her mother – Vivian Baxter Johnson. When little Angelou is taken away from Stamps, to stay with her mother, and gets to finally meet her, she is mesmerised by her beauty, her house and her lifestyle. In truth, however, in spite of having a degree in nursing, she earned money by working in gambling parlours. When talking about her mother's brother, she expresses an enthusiasm that usually springs from witnessing a rather rare event. She talks about how they have bona fide jobs in the city, "which I now understand to have been no mean feat for Negro men" (52), says Angelou.

In her work, *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson writes about the alterations that the method of discrimination underwent. She writes about how, even if somehow, a black man and a white man were employed together, "the dominant caste found ever more elaborate ways to enforce occupational hierarchy" (Wilkerson 136). Charles W. Mills wrote, that if an African American man in the nineteenth century, managed to become an architect, he had to train himself "to read architectural blueprints upside down... because he knew white clients would be made uncomfortable by having him on the same side of the desk as themselves" (qtd. in Wilkerson).

In the work, Angelou speaks about how being Black during that time, meant being an abomination. "We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous" (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 140). On March 21, 1861, the Vice President of the Confederate States, Alexander Hamilton Stevens, delivered his infamous cornerstone speech as a reaction to the then brewing civil war. The speech gained popularity, and is today remembered as one of the monumental episodes in American history wherein there was an enthusiastic attempt to prove that the subordination of the Blacks had been a divine ordination. He says,

With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eyes of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place.... The substratum of the society is made of the material fitted by nature for it, and by experience we know that it is the best, not only for the superior, but for the inferior race, that it should be so. It is, indeed, in conformity with the ordinance of the Creator. (Stevens qtd. in Stanley 62)

While this is a speech that had been delivered before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, and is decades before the time Angelou was writing about in her autobiography, that idea had continued to live on, and revealed itself in the world around her. By the 1930s, the period that Angelou writes about in her book, slavery had already been abolished. The Blacks had better chances at economic development. In the historic debate that took place between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley in Cambridge University's Union Hall, in 18 February, 1968 there was a mention about how an average Black earned around the same amount of money that an average European did, and it was a point that was agreed upon, however, in his fiery speech, Baldwin highlights how it is about the essential treatment that the Blacks in America continued to face. He spoke about how, as a child, he was never even aware of how rich his history was, and therefore, like everyone around him, agreed to the popular idea that they were in fact savages. He said,

When I was growing up, I was taught in American history books, that Africa had no history, and neither did I. That I was a savage about whom the less said, the better, who had been saved by Europe and brought to America. And, of course, I believed it. I didn't have much choice. Those were the only books there were. Everyone else seemed to agree. ("James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley")

2.5.2. Endeavours at coping with racist microaggressions

Racism does not only live in events of magnitude. It resides complacently and often even subtly in the dissonance of everyday living. The term “microaggression” was first coined by Chester M. Pierce in 1974 to “describe the subtle ways in which racism is communicated in everyday settings” (qtd. in Jernigan 129). A microassault is the further categorisation of microaggression. It is a purpose, explicit and racially derogatory interaction or behaviour (Sue et al. 2017). Angelou and her grandmother’s incident with Dr. Lincoln is an example of this.

When little Angelou was undergoing an excruciating pain in her teeth because of cavities, the white doctor refused to help them and preferred to send Angelou, who was reeling in pain, to a coloured doctor who was twenty-five miles away. The painkillers proved ineffective in healing her pain, and when they realised there was not enough enamel left to string and pull out. However, instead of taking her to the dentist, Mrs. Henderson waits to see if the pain would go away eventually. Angelou talks about there being no dentist in Stamps, and that the nearest coloured dentist was in Texarkana, which was twenty-five miles away. However, a little later, she writes that there was a dentist in Stamps – Dr. Lincoln, a white man.

When the pain did not disappear as was hoped, Mrs. Henderson takes her to Dr. Lincoln. During the Depression, Mrs. Henderson had lent money to several people – some blacks and some whites. Dr. Lincoln was one of those individuals who had received help from Mrs. Henderson, without which, he stood at risk of losing the building he had his clinic in. Mrs. Henderson was in an economic position to lend money to him, and yet, when she goes to meet him, she chooses to use the lane that would take them to the backdoor. It was the lane, Angelou writes, that was used by servants and tradespeople. The economic standing, or the act of generosity made no difference to the status of Mrs. Henderson, whose only entire identity was reduced to her colour, and the subordinate status that was socially attributed to it.

Angelou writes about the excruciating pain she was in, and yet, how, the pain of being Black outweighed that pain, when she witnessed her dear grandmother, calling herself by only her first name to Dr. Lincoln's young nurse. Neither was her help to Dr. Lincoln, nor her economic status, nor her age enough for her to be respected enough. Instead, they were made to wait for an hour, in the sun. It is in moments like this, that Angelou developed a painful understanding of the social reality she had been born into. Angelou had only heard her grandmother being adored and respected as Mrs. Henderson. She writes,

... the humiliation of hearing Momma describe herself as if she has no last name to the young white girl was equal to the physical pain. It seemed so terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness. (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 145)

At being requested for his professional help, Dr. Lincoln declines it, saying, "Annie, you know I don't treat nigra, coloured people" (146). The policy at his clinic, he says, is to not treat a person of colour. He openly pronounces that he would "rather stick his hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (147). This declaration not only dehumanises them and the entire Black community, but also robs them of dreaming that they might ever receive any kind of respect or dignity. However, it is interesting to note, that in spite of such mortifying humiliation, Mrs. Henderson is heartbroken particularly because of her inability to be able to relieve the pain that her granddaughter was undergoing. However, Angelou was witnessing it all, and she writes, "I forgot everything except her face which was almost a new one for me" (147). The pain and helplessness in the face of her grandmother, outweighed the pain that had driven them to the dentist's clinic. It is in reference to this treatment of the Blacks in America, that Baldwin had said,

One has used the myth of Negro and the myth of colour to pretend and to assume that you were dealing with, essentially, with something exotic, bizarre, and practically, according to human laws, unknown. Alas, it is not true. We're also mercenaries, dictators, murderers, liars. We are human too. (Baldwin)

There is a very smooth transition from this moment to the Angelou's imaginary version of what ensued next. There is no hint in the narration as to when there is a shift from the reality to fantasy, except the use of italics. The understandably shaken Angelou, quickly uses her imagination to cope with the situation. When Mrs. Henderson asks her to go downstairs and wait for her, Angelou writes that as she walked downstairs, she did not look back out of fear of what she might accidentally witness. The very act of sending Angelou downstairs speaks volumes of the much-anticipated situation that Mrs. Henderson knew she was heading to. She was aware that she might be insulted and in sending little Angelou away, was trying to protect her from witnessing it. James Baldwin speaks of the fear that lay at the heart of every African American adult. The fear that "nothing you can do (sic), will save your son or your daughter from meeting the same disaster and not impossibly coming to the same end" ("James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley").

From this point, there is a shift in the tone of the narration. The words are written in italic to portray this shift. It soon becomes evident that Angelou had instantly made use of her imagination to cope. In her imagination, Angelou perceives her grandmother as the same ferocious, powerful person she usually was. She writes about how "Momma walked in the room as if she owned it" (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 147), about how she spoke as though "her tongue had thinned and the words rolled off well enunciated ... and sharp like claps of thunder" (147). Her imagination seems to flip the situation she had just lived, into a form that filled in the gaps that had caused her pain and shock. In her imagination, her

grandmother is not disrespected. The doctor and the nurse do not dare call her anything but Mrs. Henderson and “Ma’am”. Instead of having to wait outside the clinic’s backdoor, little Angelou’s Momma barges in and claims her space. She does not speak with subservience, but roars with such pride and authority that it gave him “the tiniest of shakes... because of her strength the action set his hand and arms to shaking loose to the ends of his body. He stuttered much worse than Uncle Willie. “No Ma’am, Mrs. Henderson, I’m sorry” (147-148). Angelou compensates for the reality through her imagination and finds a resolution that helped her escape remembering the trauma that reality had caused her. Later, in the chapter, she speaks about how she had “obliterated the evil white man” (147-148). In this phrase, little Angelou uses the words “evil” and “white” together, signifying how, due to the general treatment the community had meted them with, she had accepted her otherness and begun to perceive the whites as evil.

The truth, however, was far from what Angelou had imagined. Dr. Lincoln had neither paid Mrs. Henderson the money he was due, nor did he want to accept that he owed her anything. He begins to rationalise his lie, by means of using the excuse of “the policy” of his clinic, which did not allow him to treat coloured patients. Unlike, the fantasy that Angelou had sought to, in an attempt to deny the truth of what really must have happened, Mrs. Henderson had stepped inside the clinic and plainly waited for him to catch a sight of her. The act of calling attention to oneself, while it appears to be an insignificantly simple one, is truly an act of authority – a privilege that Mrs. Henderson did not dare exercise. At being reminded of the money he owed her, he gets defensive and immediately and tells his nurse to not just pay her the money but even make her sign that she had in fact been ‘paid in full’. This act of microaggression is proof of the guilt, fear and the shame that he underwent at the memory of owing money, being indebted to a Black Woman for money but also, because of the favour she had granted him with. A social hierarchical system percolates deep into the workings of the

society, and reflects in the way that the dominant community treats the subjugated group. This often results in the widening gap between the two groups, with regard to opportunities, resource availability or accessibility. Carter, Johnson, Muchow et al. recognise and categorise racial discrimination into three categories:

... avoidance wherein people are rejected or ignored because of their race; hostility wherein verbal and non-verbal acts are directed at people to demean, intimidate, or communicate inferior status to them based on their race; and aversive-hostility, wherein one encounters barriers in the form of lack of opportunity or a hostile environment. (qtd. in Carter et al.)

When this discrimination becomes popularly accepted and executed, it turns into systemic racism. In the America of the 1930s, systemic racism was a normal occurrence that had come down through ages, and while it was apparently less brutal than how it was in the past, the essential ideas that lay at the foundation of the workings of the American society and the prejudices that governed everyday living, remained unscathed. Pieterse and Powel in their work, “A Theoretical Overview of the Impact of Racism on People of Color” (2016), write:

The behavioural manifestation of racism, racial discrimination, is at the intersection of power and prejudice. Racial discrimination is understood to be a combination of the ideology of racial superiority (racism) and the social structures and interpersonal behaviours associated with dominance and oppression. (qtd. in Carter et. al)

The connection between race and trauma has been debated for a long time. The original description of a trauma focused the psychological wound caused by life-threatening events such as an accident or a sexual assault or a serious injury. The PTSD in an individual, earlier, had been restricted to stress caused by visibly dangerous situations, that attacked one’s physical

existence. It was described as a result of acute-stress – an overwhelming feeling of fear and helplessness, that defies a person’s natural coping mechanism. One of the most crucial reasons as to why race related stress is not considered as trauma is because trauma is defined as a subjective experience. This would mean that two different people, who have undergone the same situation, could possibly have two separate experiences of it. Therefore, calling race related stress as trauma, many would contend, is to generalise the effect of this stress to an entire community. However, Breslau writes, “researchers have found higher rates of traumatic stress in response to significant life stressors among people of Color as compared to the general population” (qtd. in Carter et. al).

Racial discrimination has been found to have mental health effects. Carter and Forsyth, in their work, “A Guide to the Forensic Assessment of Race-Based Traumatic Stress Reactions” (2009), “found that people of Color who experienced racism were also reported higher levels of anxiety, guilt/shame, avoidance/numbing, and hypervigilance, suggesting that race-based traumatic stress may share some symptoms with the experience of PTSD” (Kirkinis et. al 4). The trauma caused by systemic racism comes under cultural trauma. In his paper, Gilad Hirschberger says, “The term *collective trauma* refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people” (1).

When a Henry Reed gives his valedictory address on her graduation day based on Shakespeare’s popular dialogue from *Hamlet* (1786), “To Be or Not to Be” (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 141), Angelou is not in the least confused. She writes with a sad conviction that there was no question about whether they could or couldn’t “be” – that owing to the white supremacist ideologies, the social hierarchy and reality and the deep-rooted prejudices in the minds of all – whether the whites or the blacks, they had no right

to exist – that their very existence was a favour to them. She writes, “...Henry Reed was giving his valedictory address, “To Be or Not to Be.” Hadn’t he heard the whitefolks? We couldn’t *be*, so that question was a waste of time” (141).

Despite the painful humiliation that Mrs. Henderson and Angelou were meted with at Dr. Lincoln’s clinic, when Mrs. Henderson narrates the incident to Uncle Willie, they have a hearty laugh about it. Angelou writes, “Momma and her son laughed and laughed over the white man’s evilness and her retributive sin” (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 150). This laughter does not spring from a feeling of amusement. It is a coping strategy. It is a way to deal with shock, or utter confusion. This is called nervous laughter, and is a person’s way of dissolving pain in a way that it becomes less hurtful. The precautions that Mrs. Henderson took when at the clinic, the instruction that she gave her granddaughter so that she was saved from witnessing her getting embarrassed, prove that she was aware of how humiliating it would be to seek for help from a white man, even though he owed her both – money and favour. However, one can never get used to an insult, only cope with it. The laughter that sent them reeling, when they discussed the humiliation is one such attempt. This affected her greatly. She considered laughter to be a contempt of the gravity of what had befallen them and befell them almost every day. In her work Angelou had written,

My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. This might be the end of the world. If Joe lost, we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than the apes. (105)

In her earlier days, Angelou portrays herself as a serious witness of the atrocities committed against her race and her. In a part, in the earlier pages of her autobiography, she

describes how she and the rest of the black community were listening to Joe Louis defending his world heavyweight boxing title. Maya Angelou and the entire black community hope for a win and their psychological redemption can be sensed thus painting the picture of an oppressed society of black community. Such rare occasions where a black person gets to claim success publicly drew lot of expectations from the black community, as the opportunities available to them were meager. Maya Angelou's words portray the extremely emotional connection of the black community to the game to an extent of considering it as a fight of black against white. Thus, claiming that Louis's loss would mean the "fall" of the race. However, Maya Angelou's confrontation with Mrs. Cullinan proved to be a turning point in her life. McPherson explains:

Mrs. Cullinan's attempts to change Maya's name for her own convenience echoes the larger tradition of American racism that attempts to prescribe the nature and limitations of a Black person's identity. In refusing to address Maya by her proper name, the symbol of her individuality and uniqueness, Mrs. Cullinan refuses to acknowledge her humanity. (Lupton and McPherson 45)

However, this is one of the incidents that shaped her into becoming one of the most important Black voices of her time. Angelou had always been carefully taught the legacy of fear and silence. She writes, "For a week I looked into Mrs. Cullinan's face as she called me Mary" (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 87). However, there comes a point during this incident when she breaks out and unlearns the lesson of silence. She writes, "When I heard Mrs. Cullinan scream, "Mary!" I picked up the casserole and two of the green glass cups in readiness. As she rounded the kitchen door I let them fall on the tiled floor" (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 87). Angelou understands that silence is not the answer. It is not a way out. In their work titled, "'A Journey towards Meaning: An Existential Psychobiography of Maya Angelou'", Harisunker and Plessis write, "Her assertions and defiance against the entrenched racial political system were initially

reactive and involved working through psychological conflicts related to her insecurities surrounding race” (Harisunker 217).

In her lifetime, Angelou had made many friends. One of them was James Baldwin – the Black American writer and activist, whom she lovingly called Jimmy. In *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, Angelou writes about the time when she was sinking into depression due to the consecutive shocks of the assassination of two immensely powerful and significant Black voices – Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. She draws from her memory about how she’s lived through such prejudice by the whites in Stamps that “a coloured person is (*sic*) not allowed to eat vanilla ice cream” (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 1160). She talks about the KKK, who visited the ‘offenders’ that happened to sing ‘My Blue Heaven’, to tell them that Molly in the lyrics was a white woman and that even in a song, they were not allowed to call her – a fictional character, just by name. The blacks would sing it as “Miss Molly and y’all” (1160). Despite years of struggle, having travelled to Europe and Ghana and so on, and having reached a point in her life where she was strong and sufficient and outside the immediate grip of it all, Angelou is still haunted by it.

Angelou’s poem, “When I Think About Myself” (1971) speaks of the “great big joke” (Angelou, *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry* 29) that their life was turned into, because of the systematic oppression that her community had undergone, and continued to undergo. The indignity that they underwent, the circumstances that Angelou was a witness of, as a child, had made her come to believe that maybe “God was white too” (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 42). The usage of antithetical ideas only further heightens the pang of pain. She speaks of their lives as an ambiguous conundrum - “a dance that’s walked,/ a song that’s spoke” (*Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry* 29).

In the poem, Angelou speaks as the Black consciousness. She speaks about the impact that the Black community underwent as a whole. She speaks of the indignation that her community underwent. How, despite working at the grassroots level to build the nation, the community was not considered to be worthy enough of basic respect. As Angelou writes, “They grow the fruit,/ But eat the rind” (Angelou *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry* 29). In her work, Angelou writes, “There was no “nobler in the mind” for the Negroes because the world didn’t think we had minds, and they let us know it” (Angelou *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 141). In his speech, Baldwin had spoken about this reality that the Black community was forced to live with. He said,

...the harbors and the ports, and the railroads of the country—the economy, especially of the Southern states—could not conceivably be what it has become, if they had not had, and do not still have, indeed for so long, for many generations, cheap labor. I am stating very seriously, and this is not an overstatement: I picked the cotton, I carried it to the market, and I built the railroads under someone else’s whip for nothing. For nothing. (Baldwin)

“When I Think About Myself” is a poem fraught with the pain of subjugation. While discussing the effect that trauma could have on its survivors, Jim Rendon, in this book *Upside*, writes, “these memories, full of dense information and thick with emotion, are much stronger than normal memories” (Rendon 49). There are instances of flashbacks, and a sense of immense powerlessness, which she presents to the readers, wrapped in a poem.

In *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, Baldwin talks to her about ‘how’ the Blacks have “survived’ despite everything. This is crucial because it is a similar pattern that Angelou used to survive too. He talks her about how they even survived slavery in America. Angelou writes

that Baldwin had talked about how the American Indians were strong and on their very own land and yet could not survive the genocide. But the Blacks could. To explain this, he says,

We put surviving into our poems and into our songs. We put it into our folk tales. We danced surviving in Congo Square in New Orleans and put it in our pots when we cooked pinto beans. We wore surviving on our backs when we clothed ourselves in the colors of the rainbow. We were pulled down so low we could hardly lift our eyes, so we knew, if we wanted to survive, we had better lift our own spirits. So we laughed whenever we got the chance. (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 1160)

A work of literature, especially an autobiography is a means to portray the truth of a period in time, or the truth of oneself. It remains as time frozen in words, for the future to behold and comprehend. The experiences it encapsulates, becomes a means to understand and learn from. However, it also becomes a means for the writer to develop a cohesive narrative for oneself – one, which has continuity as against the fragmented memories that trauma might leave them with. Angelou's works in general and her autobiographies in specific, allowed her to explore and develop this cohesive narrative that she not only accepted but also could laugh about. As her autobiography mentions, "there is nothing amusing about racial discrimination, the oppressed had funny things to say about it" (1160). In her works and interviews, Angelou never treats her trauma – personal or cultural, as a joke but could always speak of it with a tinge of harmless humour.

2.5.3. *War without and within*

When the World War broke out, even those Black men and women who had never held anything more sophisticated than a plough trained with machine guns in an attempt to secure the nation against international threat. "Everyone was a part of the war effort" (227), Angelou

writes. It had come to feel that racial prejudice was a mistake committed by the young country; that discrimination was a nightmare which was nearing its end, since “hadn’t we all, black and white, just snatched the Jews from the hell of concentration camps? Race prejudice was dead” (Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 228). Angelou writes about how, in the country, the blacks were being able to earn more money than they ever had. She writes about how, finally, they were beginning to get the dignity they deserve as fellow humans; as fellow Americans.

The nation was, very subtly, casting aside its nasty differences and uniting at the face of a foreign threat. Angelou writes, “I thought if war did not include killing, I’d like to see one every year. Something like a festival” (228). However, the soldiers who had set out to defend their country, underwent a layered fight. Philip McGuire, in his paper, “Desegregation of The Armed Forces: Black Leadership, Protest and World War II” (1983), writes,

Most of them were never accepted as military equals to white soldiers. Blacks were relegated to segregated facilities. and distinct combat More than not units, to separate made training the schools, and often service and supply segregated units and, camp even within these, black troops faced they what they considered to be unwarranted degrees of discrimination. The soldiers claimed they did their duty and fought proudly to make the world "safe for democracy." Yet, for them, the vestiges of racism were inescapable. In their letters, the soldiers told of these debilitating experiences from the day they entered the Army to the day of their discharge. (Mcguire 147)

The Black soldiers had proven their love for their nation. Their service in the army or in the sections that they had been deployed in, rang loud with the pride and commitment they felt for their nation. John H. Morrow Jr., in his paper, writes about how “wartime service as combat soldiers and the willingness to fight and die for their country should have served as

indisputable proof of their right to full and equal citizenship under the laws of the American republic". (Murrow 13)

However, when the war got over, they were sent back to their ghettos; into the same little spaces they were allowed to be in, in the nation they were prepared to give their lives for, by their white counterparts. Angelou writes about how "their expanded understanding could never again be accorded into these narrow confines" (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 228). Angelou writes, perfectly aware of how nothing – no amount of love, or sacrifice could help a Black find any respite from the subordinate status that the white American society had carved on them.

She, painfully aware of the tragedy of being in the then, seemingly inescapable existence as a member of the subjugated community. She writes about the deplorable state that the soldiers lived in, post-war. She uses the metaphor of their uniform to describe the wearing away of the pride they felt, or the glory they had lived through. All parts of the uniform seem to be worn away by time, in the truth of their existence – the ghettos; all but their shoes, which remained agonisingly unharmed by it, and remained the unscathed memory of the glimpse of dignity that the war might have shown to them. Angelou writes,

These military heroes of a few months earlier, who were discharged from the Army in the city which knows how, began to be seen hanging on the ghetto corners like forgotten laundry left on the backyard fence. Their once starched khaki uniforms were gradually bastardized. An ETO jacket, plus medals, minus stripes, was worn with out-of-fashion zoot pants. The trim army pants, creases trained in symmetry, were topped by loud, color-crazed Hawaiiin shirts. The shoes remained. Only the shoes. The Army had made those shoes to last. And dammit, they did. (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 229)

It seemed to the Blacks that the war was a better chance at a life with whatever little dignity it allowed them. The Black consciousness in Angelou makes her wonder if living through the war was better than living in the times of peace in America, since, unlike the war-time, peace could bring no reason to its citizens to stand as one. She writes, “we lived through a major war. The question in the ghettos was, can we make it through a minor peace?” (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 229)

When later in her life, she went to Ghana, she was met with another intricate complexity in her identity. While, initially, she rejoiced at how she was finally in a space which was socially, and politically governed by the Blacks – that is, it was a space that did not drench her in guilt or shame at being a Black. Instead, it celebrated it. She writes about being excited that she was on a land, whose rules were made by the Black; where, if one breaks the law even, one would be held responsible by the Blacks. She writes, delightedly, that it was a place where no one could “lay any social unhappiness or personal failure at the door of color prejudice” (948).

However, she is soon met with a crisis of identity, when she realises that she is neither accepted in America, nor accepted with trust, in Africa. When there is an attempt of assassination of the President of Ghana, “the spring burst and the happy clock stopped turning” (948), writes Angelou, as the country turned paranoid about any outsider – the Black American, they said, could not be trusted either.

However, it was here that she met Malcolm X, and was completely swept away by his unsurmountable spirit to speak and fight for the Blacks, and his magnificent speeches. Later, Angelou turned into an activist, herself. She expresses her enthusiasm and love for the Black community through all of art – which remained not just a self-expression, but a means of protest. Her autobiographies are a means of expression to the world, to tell them of their glorious tale of survival of her community, and a mirror for the Blacks, to celebrate their fierce

struggle at the face of subjugation, discrimination, and the brutal prejudice that defined most part of their lives. In one of the chapters in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), Angelou writes,

In America we danced, laughed, procreated; we became lawyers, judges, legislators, teachers, doctors, and preachers, but as always, under our glorious costumes we carried the badge of a barbarous history sewn to our dark skins. It had often been said that Black people were childish, but in America we had matured without ever experiencing the true abandon of adolescence. Those actions which appeared to be childish most often were exhibitions of bravado, not unlike humming a jazz tune while walking into a gathering of the Ku Klux Klan. (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 947)

2.6. Conclusion

The environment and the events Angelou grew up in, shaped her profoundly. She was born into a community caged inside the colour of their skin by the perception of not only their white perpetrators, but unfortunately even of their own. Like most Black children, she got thrown into the furnace of the unfortunate cultural reality of the then Black Americans. While initially, she only used her imagination and repression to cope, with time she grew more and more expressive, especially after metaphorically shattering the silence she'd been trained in, by breaking the casserole and cups as a mark of defiance and assertion in Mrs. Cullinan's house.

Instead of continuing the tradition of fear, with time Angelou's trauma led her to become comfortable with taking up more space. She became the first Black female streetcar conductor. She joined the Harlem Guild of Writers, travels to Ghana and later even joined the civil rights' movement, working alongside Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. She was even

the first Black person to read a poem at the Presidential inauguration. Recently, she has also become the first Black woman to ever feature on the US coin.

The study of her works makes it known that with time, she not only accepted her physicality, but even celebrated it, much like her mother did. She embraced her identity and with time gained enough confidence and power to become the mouthpiece for others too. Despite the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, and the knowledge that there was always a possibility for something as brutal as that to befall her, she continued to work for the civil rights' movement. She was the first Black woman to ever write her story with such brutal honesty. This even amounted to the book being banned. She dared to accept what was and even look back at it all with a touch of humour.

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Chapter III: A Woman in the 'Black' World: A Fiery Fight Against Patriarchy

3.1. Introduction

3.2. Black feminism

3.3. Angelou in a patriarchal, black world

3.3.1. Sexual abuse

3.3.2. The inferiority complex of being a black girl

3.3.3. The abandonment from the first female figure – her mother

3.3.4. Tracing the involvement of men in Angelou's life

3.3.5. Tracing the influence of women in Angelou's life

3.4. Conclusion

3.1. Introduction

Maya Angelou's identity severely revolves around the constructs of race and gender that she was born into. She was a Black Woman – a woman tied down by the shackles of race, and bound further, with the chains of patriarchy. In her seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir writes that “the whole hypocritical system” (Beauvoir 936) – patriarchy, had resulted in “the slavery of half of humanity” (936) and the ““division” of humanity” (936). However, the problem becomes doubly complex for those who belong in the oppressed section of the society and must face a second form of oppression within that community. When one seeks to understand the oppression that black women or a black woman has undergone, one must remember the two primary forces of domination that they must live with – the problem of being Black and the problem of being a woman.

Feminism is an ideological movement. It came into existence as an apparently political movement, which later took a sociological perspective. However, the movement of feminism goes beyond biological constraints. It is an ideology; a fight against patriarchy in general. The movement by itself is often too general to cater to the problems faced by individual groups or people. American professor, writer, editor and feminist, Roxane Gay speaks about the necessity of inclusivity in the movement – a need to allow more than what essentialist feminism runs on. In her 1989 essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989), Kimberley Crenshaw introduced the idea and coined the term ‘intersectionality’. She wrote,

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions.

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if

a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (“Demarginalizing” 149)

She felt that anti-racist and feminist movements were somehow overlooking the unique challenges faced by Black women, since they underwent a combination of racism and patriarchy. She stated, that legislation against racism, were framed to provide protection to Black men. On the other hand, legislation against patriarchy was framed to provide protection to white women. It is an essential framework to truly engage around privilege and power. It means, listening to others, examining and acknowledging our privileges, and asking questions regarding who may be adversely affected by our world. It primarily seeks to invite and include the voices of the marginalised individuals and communities and acknowledge and work against their unique experience with regard to their oppressive forces. In this chapter, we will develop an understanding of racism and feminism that was prevalent during the time of Maya Angelou and evaluate her response to the same in her works.

The civilized social system is made up of men and women. Both male and female of our species have equal rights. However, the history of human society does not tell that story with the spirit of gender inclusivity. History is patriarchal, and despite the changing times, so is the present. Unfortunately, men have always dominated women by controlling the societal rules and ensured that women had no way to complain against the inequality. However, with time, women began to find ways to bring about a change. They began to understand that they don't just need to be absolutely aware, but also conscious about their own rights. Slowly, women started raising their voices against the patriarchal oppression they had been facing. This combined effort towards achieving equality over oppression became to be understood as feminism.

A patriarchal society is one, where men control both public and private spheres.

Patriarchy is the structuring and systematizing of the society based on family units, where male members of the family have primary responsibility for the welfare of the family. It also gives them the authority over family decisions and actions. The concept of patriarchy is often used in extension of reference to the expectation that men take primary responsibility for the welfare of the society as a whole. The word ‘Patriarchy’ is derived from two Greek words - *patēr* (father) and *archē* (rule) where *patr-os* is genitive form of *patēr*, which shows the root from *part* while the word *archē* actually means ‘beginning’ and is also used metaphorically to refer to ‘ruling’ as rulers are considered to ‘start’ new society/age. Various scholars define Patriarchy in their own point of view. For example, in *The Gender Knot* (1997), Allan G. Johnson said that,

Patriarchy is an obsession with control as a core value around which social life is organized. As with any system of privilege that elevates one group by oppressing another, control is an essential element of patriarchy: men maintain their privilege by controlling women and anyone else who might threaten it. (Johnson 14)

Patriarchy creates a social environment where all perceived “manly” behavior such as aggressiveness, assertiveness, rationality, ability to control emotion, independence etc. are considered constructive for social development, benefit and control. On the other hand, all perceived “feminine” traits such as gentleness, modesty, sympathy, compassion, tenderness, sensitivity, intuitiveness, dependence are considered destructive for social development, control and stability. By developing a gender dissimilarity in the society where men are put in a higher spot than women, patriarchy established a false concept that, men should lead the society while women should obey men’s words and also promotes itself that this system is good for society as it is defined by nature and the natural relationship between men and women.

The feminist ideology, like all ideologies is an ever-growing and evolving phenomenon. They vary in goals, strategies, and affiliation. They often overlap, and some feminists identify themselves with several branches of feminist thought. There is liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, multiracial feminism, Marxist feminism, post-colonial feminism, cultural feminism, new age feminism, third-world feminism, post-structural feminism, post-modern feminism, etc. However, there are three main types of feminism that correlates to Maya Angelou's work namely- liberal feminism, radical feminism, multiracial feminism and socialist feminism.

Liberal feminism emphasizes on the equality of men and women through political and legal reforms. This individualistic form of feminism focuses on the women's ability to display and sustain their equality in their own actions and choices. Liberal feminism utilizes the personal interactions between men and women as a point of focus to bring transformation to the society. Liberal feminists believe that women can assert their ability to achieve equality and so it is possible to effect transformation without altering the structure of society. Liberal feminists focus on solving issues related to reproductive and abortion rights, sexual harassment, voting rights, access to education, equal pay for equal work, affordable childcare-health care. They strive to throw light on the occurrence of sexual and domestic violence against women.

Radical feminism centers on the basic understanding that sexism, the male-controlled capitalist hierarchy, is the root cause of oppression against women. Radical feminists believe that women can find true freedom only by annihilating the patriarchal social structure that is inherently oppressive and dominating. In other words, they focus on fighting the male-based authoritative power structure that implements the oppression and inequality. Their core aim, which is radical as the name suggests, is to complete overhauling of the existing system and its values as they believe that the society cannot be reformed significantly with the presence

of the existing system.

On the other hand, socialist feminism links the oppression of women to Marxist ideologies about exploitation and labor. Socialist feminism focuses on both the public and private spheres of a woman's life. They believe that liberation from women's oppression can be achieved only by dissolution of sources of oppression in economic and cultural spheres. In other words, socialist feminists believe that inequality at the workplace and the domestic spheres are the reasons for oppression against women. Socialist feminists believe that the patriarchal system exploits women in multiple ways such as- prostitution, domestic work, childcare, and marriage by devaluing women and their contribution to the society. Socialist feminists focus their efforts on a wholesome, long-lasting transformation instead of individual basis. They perceive the transformation needs to occur not just with men but with whole society as the oppression of women is a part of a larger pattern of the society affecting everyone in the capitalist system.

3.2. Black Feminism

Intersectionality is a way of examining social relations by examining intersecting forms of discrimination. Social relations are complicated, and could encompass several forms of oppression, like racism, sexism, even ageism. These could be present and active at the same time in a person's life. Everyday approaches of building equality tend to focus on one type of discrimination or another. Intersectionality is the understanding and addressing all potential roadblocks to an individual's well-being. It understands that unique oppressions exist, but it also tries to understand how they compound and change an individual's experience, in combination.

The discussion about the oppression that a Black woman, or Black women in general undergo, cannot be separated from the history. The identity of the Black community in America

has its roots in its history of slavery. However, Black women were a minority within this already oppressed group. While the entire community face the onslaught of prejudice and brutal discrimination, dehumanisation, the perspective of the identity of Black women remained.

From the mid-60s to the early 70s, black women were in a difficult situation to have to shift from the civil rights and feminist movements. Black women worked as the backbone of the civil rights movement however, their contributions were under-recognized as black men, influenced by the whites, began to adopt patriarchal roles. Black women's efforts towards the feminist movement were unrecognized and discriminated by the white women. They paid little to no attention to class issues such as rich and poor sections where black women were predominantly from poor section. Historically, black women ended up choosing racial issues to resolve over gender issues, a choice that was especially poignant during the Reconstruction when African American female leaders, such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, supported the Fifteenth Amendment that gave black men the right to vote over the objections of white women suffragists.

African-Americans stereotypes and generalizations have developed within the American society since colonial years of settlement. An art historian Guy C. McElroy observed the restrictions on black men and women in his exhibit *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940* (1990). According to him, the artistic convention of representing African-Americans as less than fully realized human beings began with Justus Engelhardt Kühn's colonial era painting of Henry Darnall III as a child. The market demand for such artworks echoed the outlooks and economic status of the society.

From the colonial era through the American Revolution, notions about African-Americans were used in propagandas related to the issue of slavery. Paintings like John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1778) and Samuel Jennings' *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* (1792) are examples of the deliberation about the role of Black people

in America. Jennings' painting characterizes African-Americans as passive, submissive recipients of slavery's abolition (liberty) and a graciously bestowed chance to gain knowledge.

Black women have an extensive feminist tradition dating back to 19th century activists such as Maria W. Stewart and Sojourner Truth as well as organizations like the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs founded in 1896 and the National Council of Negro Women founded in 1935. Events of the 60s and 70s, including the change in the ideology of black men regarding the role of black women, drove the efforts of such organizations to focus awareness about the new concerns such as race, gender, and class. Few other organizations that took part in similar efforts are as follows:

1. The ANC (Aid to Needy Children) Mothers Anonymous of Watts and the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO).
2. Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC).
3. National Organization for Women (NOW).
4. The National Black Feminist Organization.

Recognising the importance of intersectionality, Alice Walker coined the term *Womanism* in 1983. This new feminist ideology addresses the unique history of the black women with racial and gender oppression. Prominent women such as Angela Davis, Kimberley Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Beverly Guy Sheftall, Bell Hooks, Darlene Clark Hine, Paula Giddings, and Deborah Gray White help expand the context of black women's activism and their history by discussing the core issues related to race, gender, and class.

In 2002, the World Health Organization defined violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury,

death, psychological harm, male development, or deprivation" (WHO 2002 6). This definition includes intentionality towards the committing of the act irrespective of its outcome. In this context, sexual violence towards someone finds a significant clarity.

In this regard, the victim of such sexual violence has the right to seek justice and rise their voice against it. However, more often, we come across victims who lack the confidence to speak up due to the power structure of the patriarchal society and consequence of offending people with power. These victims gain confidence majorly by following someone who understands their thoughts and emotions as a victim of sexual crime. In this regard, Maya Angelou became a beacon of inspiration and power for women involved in feminist movements and who were victims of sexual harassment. However, Maya Angelou did not command such inspirational power from beginning. She went through a unique journey with herself as a victim and later found her voice.

In this #MeToo era women across the world being able to speak out against sexual victimization even though it largely remains a privileged act, primarily restricted to those belonging to the higher economic strata of the society and to the citizens of first world countries or democracies. Several countries with an authoritarian power structure still throw hindrances in the way of women expressing or speaking out about such sexual harassments.

3.3. Angelou in a patriarchal, black world

Maya Angelou was lived through a time when patriarchy was dominant. Apart from being a mirror to the racial realities of her community and herself, her autobiographies are testimony of her personal journey from being a victim of patriarchy and physical abuse, to someone who owns it all and even narrates it without any fear or inhibition. Through the works Angelou moves from identifying herself as a rape victim and survivor from a country town to being a strong empowered woman who could not only accept every bit of her story whether the

it resonated with her 'image' or not, but also, presented it before the world in the form of her works. With time, she also grew to become the voice of many a voiceless woman. Her works cover topics that resonate with Black American - a celebration of Black motherhood, a strong critique of racism, discussing the importance of family, and the pursuit of independence, dignity, and equality.

Young Angelou, the central character of the book, has been called a character that is symbolic of every black girl who's grown up in America. Even the titles of her autobiographies present a story of the metaphorical bird's journey from being caged to being flung out into the open. Angelou experiences in sexual and racial experiences are the cage she seeks to set herself free from. Maya Angelou's description of the sexual harassment that she experienced as an 8-year-old child overwhelms her first autobiography, although presented briefly. The events covered in the book make it evident that Angelou's "seven-year-old world (had) humpty-dumptyed, never to be put back together again" (Angelou 45). She brings the whole experience of her childhood in this book by utilizing her means of treatment of racism as a theme. In an early age, she is drawn to the power of words and literacy and that eventually helps her cope with the disorienting experiences.

Be it the presence of absent parents, a strong, fierce grandmother who lives in fear of the whites around them, her insecurity about her Black self, the presence of Mrs. Flowers who is the icon of feminism for her, her attempts at filling the void she felt in her by being particularly subservient to the wishes and desires of the lovers she had, her tryst with prostitution, her rise from it, being a single teen mother and the constant guilt of not fitting into her perfect definition of motherhood and her acceptance of it all, Angelou is a woman of power who not only lived through but fought a fiery fight against patriarchy.

3.3.1. Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse, also referred as molestation, is an undesired sexual behavior by one

person towards another. An act is considered a sexual assault when the force is immediate, of short duration, or sporadic. While the offender is referred to as a sexual abuser or (often derogatively) molester. This term covers any behavior by an adult or older adolescent towards any one that is aimed to stimulate nonconsensual sexual response. The involvement of a child or any individual below the age of consent, as the target is referred to as child sexual abuse or statutory rape. This is the type of sexual abuse that Maya Angelou describes in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She endures this most severe form of abuse when she moves to St. Louis to live with her mother and her mother's boyfriend.

Maya Angelou's autobiographies have been written in imitation of real time. It is this that intensifies the effect of especially her first work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The work has been written from the perception of a child. It has enabled the readers to perceive the horrors and the grim reality of the diabolical pervasiveness of racism of the 1920s and 1930s. Maya has successfully presented the work as an innocent reception of some of the most gruesome and traumatic events of her life. The success of the work lies in its understated expressions of pain.

The presentation of the naïve understanding of severe wound these incidents verily left on her psyche is marvellous. The impact of one's childhood on one's life is tremendous. One's primary beliefs and understanding of the world, oneself and one's place in the world gets defined by the experiences of the childhood. In one of the chapters Maya beautifully describes this. She writes,

All of childhood's unanswered questions must finally be passed back to the town and answered there. Heroes and bogey men, values and dislikes, are first encountered and labelled in that early environment. In the later years they change faces, places and maybe races, tactics, intensities and goals, but beneath those penetrable masks they wear forever the stocking-capped faces of childhood. (Angelou 20)

It is interesting to note how to an innocent mind, incapable of comprehending the intensity of the crime she had been a victim of, is more affected by the death of her perpetrator. According to Angelou, to her, it had looked like it was her word that caused the death of a man. Following this, Angelou went into a deliberate muteness which lasted for around five years.

According to Dr. Nina Tottenham, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Columbia University, what one faces or is met with in their tender years has enduring consequences. Children are comparatively unable to manage their emotions because of their developing neurobiology, and therefore are vulnerable beings. During this period, they simply absorb and learn the primary ways in which the world functions. It is due to this, that the environment, the encounters, and the experiences a child has, become the defining factors of their core personality. It is due to this, that the traumatic incidents that Angelou faced during her early years, remained at the centre of most of her experiences through life.

Maya narrates the incident with tremendous meticulous confusion. While Maya narrates the other incidents with preciseness and clarity, one can evidently find elements of blurred understanding when she narrates this event. The understatement of Maya Angelou present the cold, grotesque crime from the perspective of the ignorant, innocent eyes of a child. Young Maya Angelou used to have nightmares often because of which her mother allowed her to sleep in her bed that she shared with her boyfriend Mr. Freeman. Maya Angelou writes the following while discussing the incident:

One morning [mother] got out of bed for an early errand, and I fell asleep again. But I awoke to a pressure, a strange feeling on my left leg. It was too soft to be a hand, and it wasn't the touch of clothes. Whatever it was, I hadn't encountered the sensation in all the years of sleeping with Momma. It didn't move, and I was startled too. I turned my head a little to the left to see if Mr Freeman was awake and gone, but his eyes were open and both hands were above the cover. I knew, as if I had always

known, it was his “thing” on my leg. He said, “Just stay right here, Ritie, I ain’t gonna hurt you.” I wasn’t afraid, a little apprehensive, maybe, but not afraid. Of course I knew that lots of people did “it” and they used their “thing” to accomplish the deed, but no one I knew had ever done it to anybody. Mr. Freeman pulled me to him, and put his hand between my legs. (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 59)

Maya Angelou refers to the male genitals as “it” drawing the inhumane and beastly nature of the abuse. It also suggests the shame associated with the experience and in general discussion about sex. Later, when Maya Angelou was by herself on the bed one morning after Vivian left the bed and the house. This is when Mr. Freeman sexually molests Maya. He does not rape her but proceeds to masturbate on the bed whilst holding her close to him. She writes the following to present the dialogue between them and her thoughts,

‘Now, I didn’t hurt you. Don’t get scared.’ He threw back the blankets and his “thing” stood up like a brown ear of corn. He took my hand and said, “Feel it”. It was mushy and squirmy like the inside of a freshly killed chicken. Then he dragged me on top of his chest with his left arm, and his right hand was moving so fast and his heart was beating so hard that I was afraid that he would die. (59)

Maya Angelou does not show anger towards this incident as one would expect. Later during spring, when Vivian stays out all night, Mr. Freeman sends Maya to buy milk. When Maya returns, Mr. Freeman rapes her. This time he shows his superiority by threatening to kill her if she screams. He also threatens to kill Bailey if she tells anyone. Maya Angelou’s words describing this incident are,

...Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot. (63)

Instead of recounting the assault in detail as an adult Maya Angelou uses scriptural allusions and tries to conceptualize it differently. An 8-year-old Maya Angelou would have processed it the same way. The use of needle and the camel is in reference to the biblical teaching that says that it is easy for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go to the heaven. Thus, throwing light on the power imbalance between a vulnerable, innocent young girl and a grown pervert man. In another section Maya Angelou writes

Finally, he was quiet, and then came the nice part. He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last. But then he rolled over, leaving me in a wet place and stood up. (59-60)

This clearly represents how an 8-year-old struggles to understand the difference between fatherly love and sexual assault. However, it is not just this. While it was gruesome, this was the first time that Angelou ever experienced physical love and affection. She had been living away from her parents since she was three. Her grandmother, though a very loving woman, never held her physically close – never, into an embrace. Angelou was a Black little girl who was already struggling with a need for validation that she was beautiful and could be liked how she was physically. Harisunker and Plessis write, “the young Angelou equated good looks with worthiness and believed that her physical appearance made her unworthy of receiving love” (Harisunker 215). When Mr. Freeman rapes her, her desperate need for validation blurs her understanding of what was truly happening in that moment. It is due to this, that before her family reacts to the knowledge of her rape, the violent act of crime gets reduced to a mere confusion in Angelou's mind.

3.3.2. The inferiority complex of being a black girl

Psychological abuse (also referred to as psychological violence, emotional abuse, or

mental abuse) is when a person gets traumatized by being subjected, or exposed to another person's behavior. It could result in psychological trauma, and could present itself in the form of anxiety, chronic depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Psychological abuse often occurs in situations of power imbalance in abusive relationships and may include acts of bullying, gaslighting and also abuse in the workplace. Angelou faced this as a little girl. In several instances in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou expresses the effect this abuse had on her self-worth. She writes,

I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil. (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 8)

Angelou's encounters in Stamps and the general perception about what could be called beauty had distorted the meaning of the word for her. She did not take much time to realise that she was everything that 'beauty' was not. The standardization of beauty and its characteristics could verily be called psychological abuse. Even today the abuse caused by the understanding and portrayals of what is beautiful affects and stigmatizes anything outside its arbitrary and socially constructed definition. While this affects women in general, being exposed to it as a Black girl and woman is even more harmful. This is a major reason behind why "throughout her early life and teenage years, Angelou appears to have been absorbed with her body and her physically". (Harisunker 215)

Young Maya Angelou perceived being black with great apathy. Her character struggles with her looks by feeling ugly and awkward. By around 5 or 6 years of age, Maya has already begun to associate beauty with whiteness. This throws light on the status of the society in that period. It is a sign that racism rampant in the society thus influencing the thoughts of a young girl to perceive herself ugly and undesirable.

A light shade had been pulled down between the Black community and all things white, but one could see through it enough to develop a fear-admiration-contempt for the white “things”—white folks’ cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women. But above all, their wealth that allowed them to waste was the most enviable. (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 41)

Here, Maya Angelou’s observations about the white people is portrayed. Her fixation on their clothing as a sign of distorted views and it also refers to an incident that occurred in church when she realized that her fairy-tale taffeta dress is actually a hand-me-down from a old white woman. In her childhood days at Stamps, Arkansas, Maya Angelou experienced segregation to an extent that she often found it hard to visualize the white people’s looks.

In the latter part of the autobiography, it becomes clear that even though Maya Angelou was restricted by circumstances, like a bird is in the cage, her attitude and her evolving perception helped her find joy. Thus, the first autobiography details the conditions of living and the horrors of the then patriarchal society, but also portrays the growth and evolution of Maya Angelou from a gawky “too-big Negro girl with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil” (Angelou 5) to a confident young woman who has an “immaculate pregnancy” (280). Her unique experience as both woman and a black person, in addition to her strong personality, shaped brilliantly as an inspiration for others to follow.

Sojourner Truth, one of the most powerful Black feminists and women’s rights activist of her time, had escaped slavery in 1827. In her powerful “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech in the women’s convention in 1851, she established her identity as an African-American and a woman. In her attempt to establish the difference between the treatment of white and black women, she said,

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Truth)

In her 1893 speech – an address delivered at the World's Congress of Representative Women in Chicago, Anna Julia Cooper had said, “The white woman could least plead for her own emancipation; the black woman, doubly enslaved, could but suffer and struggle and be silent” (Cooper). In her work, *A Voice from the South*, Cooper writes, that it is only a Black woman who can say, "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me" (Cooper). By saying this, Cooper signifies that the progress of the Black community is not possible without the progress or growth of Black women. She amalgamates the issues of feminism and racism by including the women in the community in the narrative of growth, progress and emancipation.

In her work, Cooper efficiently shifts the focus from the gazed, to the gazer. She identifies the white community as the gazer who sets and tests the gazed on the aesthetic standards which are purely and exclusively based on them. There is a racial hierarchy in the established standards of beauty and aesthetics that dominate the world even today. While it is essentially true for everyone, beyond the bounds of gender, this notion of fitting in and being or being seen as beautiful affect the community of women even more since, to look acceptably “pretty” or “beautiful”, this community must stick to the constructs of the time, of fashion, and

of beauty standards that are hardly inclusive or intersectional. Language absorbs ideas that are popularly accepted and have turned customary. It is due to this that that ideas of “white beauty” and “black ugliness” had long reigned over the ideas of fashion and beauty.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in an attempt to escape the pain of being a part of the community, and being born with features that do not conform to the standards of beauty little Rittie creates a false reality in her mind, by means of her imagination. She uses denial, as a means to cope or defend herself from that pain. She tells herself that she was not really an “ugly” black girl, but in truth, was a beautiful white girl. She tells herself that this was not the truth, but just a “black ugly dream” (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 8) that she would eventually wake up from. She tells herself that the blackness was a curse that her fairy godmother cursed her with, since, in truth she was too beautiful for her to not get jealous of her. When Maya goes back to live with her mother at the age of 13, she is taken by surprise when her mother calls her a “mother’s beautiful daughter” (Angelou *Mom Me Mom*). She says, “I was not used to being called beautiful” (Angelou *Mom Me Mom*). It is from statements as these, that one can clearly witness how her perception of herself is clouded by the dark ideas of beauty.

It is interesting however, that later, in spite of living through an age which discriminated, devalued and humiliated her features as a Black woman, one of her most popular and powerful poems is “Phenomenal Woman” – a work that glorifies and celebrates not just her, but the beauty in blackness, in general. It is a rebellion against the ideas of beauty that have been popularly accepted and established. In the work, Angelou says, “Pretty women wonder where my secret lies./ I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size/ But when I start to tell them,/ They think I’m telling lies” (Angelou *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry* 126).

The work seeks to establish that beauty is not restricted to the colour of the skin or the texture of one's hair. It is not restricted by the straightness of one's nose or teeth. It attempts to root the idea that beauty lies in confidence – in the spirit of a person, in the exuberance of their life. She says, "It's in the click of my heels,/ The bend of my hair,/ the palm of my hand,/ The need for my care./ 'Cause I'm a woman/ Phenomenally./ Phenomenal woman,/ That's me." (Angelou *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry* 127) It lies in a total acceptance and the celebration of the self. The kind of spirit that is charismatic enough to grow on those who look at it, feel it, absorb it. This sense of beauty could be an idea she understood and learnt from her mother.

The life and personality of Maya evolves across her autobiographies. Thaiya Afzal states in her article "The Song of The Caged Bird: Revelations of the Self in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*", that Maya Angelou's first autobiographical statement is a carefully conceived record of a young girl's slow and clumsy growth. It also states that her autobiographies are a record of her initiation into her world and unearthing of her inner self (3). In the mind of little Angelou beauty and worthiness had a direct association. When she says, "My mother's beauty literally assailed me.... I was struck dumb. I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children" (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 50), she immediately declares herself unworthy of having a mother as beautiful as Vivian Baxter due to her own deep rooted insecurity about her appearance.

3.3.3. *The abandonment from the first female figure – her mother*

The abandonment from her mother was one of the first traumas which she underwent as a three-year old. It is due to this that even when Maya and her brother were taken back to St. Louis, she could hardly relate to her mother. Maya found herself calling her "Lady". In one of her interviews, Maya talks about how Vivian did not look like her mother, with the difference

she portrayed in the presentation of herself. Vivian Baxter belonged to a higher economic class than Maya's grandmother or the blacks who resided in Stamps then. Also, Maya had said, that Vivian could not be her mother as she called her grandmother "Momma". Maya did grow up to understand Vivian better and eventually even developed a very loving relationship with her. She would call her, her "great protection", but never called her a mother. She called herself and Bailey the "unwanted children" (Angelou 50).

As a child she would try to recall the face of her mother but would only be able to conjure a faceless, bewildering image. "The face was brown, like a big O, since I couldn't fill in the features I printed MOTHER across the O, and tears would fall down my cheeks like warm milk" (Angelou 44), writes Angelou. While talking about her father, Maya speaks about how "not only did I not feel any loyalty to my father, I figured that if I had been Uncle Willie's child I would have received much better treatment". (Angelou 15)

Psychologist Paul Maclean calls 'family' a biological institution that goes back to 180 million years. He stresses on the kind of trauma one might undergo if separated from one's parent – especially, one's mother. Psychologist Deborah Rose calls home one of the most dangerous places to be, due to the amount of damage it has the potential of causing to a person, especially a child. The separation of Maya from her mother, caused her to believe that she was insignificant to her.

Every incident one comes across leaves a mark on that person's heart and one's psyche. However, incidents and especially trauma could leave a doubly deep mark on the mind of a child. A child is usually, neurologically unable of understanding, and therefore handling one's emotions. Incidents that might give rise to doubts and confusion, incidents of pain and hurt, and trauma could leave the child feeling lost in spite of everything and since this confusion

remains unprocessed and unresolved in those early years, gradually it usually becomes the essence of their subconscious personality.

Maya starts to narrate her shift from California to Stamps after her parents decided to “putting an end to their calamitous marriage” (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 9). Maya Angelou also realized at this juncture that this was common in the society where “frightened Black children to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities or back to grandmothers in Southern towns” (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 10). In Stamps, she met Momma and Uncle Willie, and started to live in the Store along with Bailey. Although they both took some time to adapt to the new place Stamps, and particularly the Store, became her “favorite place to be”. Thus, the representation of quality and tone of life in “South” becomes that of harshness and brutality in comparison to the “heaven called California” (43) that she knew her parents were living in.

Little Angelou was aware of the terrible conditions under which the workers of Stamps lived, and the condition that she had been sent to live in. The presence of the Ku Klux Klan (whites), the wanton murder of Black folks, the racial separation in the town, and the incidents of denigration etc (Afzal 4). Even as a child Angelou was aware of the intrinsically racist environment that she was growing up in. She writes,

In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well-dressed. (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 24)

When Maya and Bailey received their Christmas gifts from their parents, they started

wonder why they were sent away from home and if it was due to some mistake of theirs. “Why did they send us away? and What did we do so wrong? So Wrong?” (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 44). She writes about how she and Bailey Jr.

...were told they could have all the oranges they could eat. And the sun shone all the time. I was sure that wasn't so. I couldn't believe that our mother would laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children. (43)

3.3.4. *Tracing the involvement of men in Angelou's life*

Angelou's autobiographies primarily focus on the women in her life, when it comes to her personal life. These powerful women overpower the narrative, and establish their importance in Angelou's life before the readers. However, men have played a significant role in her life. While Mr. Freeman is the first name that one would refer to in this context, there are others too.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya, the protagonist of the work, adores her older brother, Bailey Jr. above everyone else. One of the reasons for this was that they were both abandoned by their parents, together. He was the only companion she had, during their unfortunate train travel when she was only three and he was five years old. In her work, she mentions how blessed she felt to have him in her life. Angelou is amazed and grateful about how despite being “small, graceful and smooth” (21) and having “velvet-black skin” (21), Bailey loves her completely. She writes,

Bailey was the greatest person in my world. And the fact that he was my brother, my only brother, and I had no sisters to share him with, was such good fortune that it made me want to live a Christian life just to show God that I was grateful... (21)

Her love for her brother was evident to even Mr. Freeman who uses it to her disadvantage. He uses it to enforce silence upon Angelou, so that his heinous crime remains undercover. He says, “...if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey” (63). Even in her most vulnerable

moments, she trusted him and told him who had raped her. She writes, “I believed him. Bailey didn’t lie to me. So I told him” (66). When she learns of Mr. Freeman’s death and guilt forces her to go into mutism, she writes, “I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey”. (70)

Angelou’s father is present through his absence in her earlier autobiographies. Bailey fills this gap profoundly for Maya. It is due to this, that when she had to change her name from ‘Marguerite’, during her creative journey as a dancer, she chooses to become ‘Maya’ – an expansion of Bailey’s name for her – ‘Mya’ sister. He is the anchor that kept her going through one of her toughest storms.

Another important man in her early life was Uncle Willie. He was their father’s brother and helps his mother and Maya’s grandmother with the store in Stamps. Due to an accident when he was only three, he was left with a disability – in the works, he is portrayed as someone who walks with a cane, has a twisted left hand and has his left face paralysed due to which he has difficulty speaking. Angelou writes, “Uncle Willie used to sit, like a giant black Z” (13). He was a disciplinarian who would make sure that both Bailey Jr. and Maya learnt their multiplication table.

The most important man in Angelou’s childhood that left a lasting impression on her life was her father – Bailey Johnson. His almost absolute absence in the lives of his children, causes more harm than would normally do in the life of Angelou. He spoke “proper English, like the school principal, and even better” (45). He caricatured the stereotypical white man. While his persona did impress Maya, she did not seem to find any familiarity in him. He remained a stranger, who had come to just transport her and her brother back to their mother. This distance from her father confuses Maya about the intentions of Mr. Freeman, during the rape. When he holds her close and inappropriately, she thinks

He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn’t ever let me go. I felt at home. From the

way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last. (59-60)

As opposed to Bailey Johnson, whom Angelou calls Daddy Bailey, Daddy Clidell “the first father [Maya] would know. For a while, Maya reexperiences some of the personal dislocation already felt so acutely in Stamps and in St. Louis” (Lupton and McPherson 41). He was her mother's then husband, a gambler and respected businessman. He is a foil to Daddy Bailey. He teaches her lessons about life, spends time with her, tells her stories and even teaches her how to play cards. Despite not having kids of his own, he was a father, and the kind that Angelou had been waiting to have. Angelou writes that “He was a simple man who had no inferiority complex about his lack of education and, even more amazing, no superiority complex because he had succeeded despite that lack” (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 169).

The only return Bailey Johnson makes in the autobiography is when she goes to live with him in California, when she is about fifteen years old. He had invited her to spend the summer with him, and this hint of warmth on the part of her father, she writes, had made her “jumpy with excitement” (174). She learns that he hasn't changed still. His coldness and indifference were as constant as his “amused impenetrable face” (175). He makes no attempt to get to know her and despite knowing about her history of sexual abuse, jokes to a guard about getting married to her. When he “caressed (*sic*) her cheek” (178) and tells her that he would marry her and have ‘many babies’, he finds “that promise the funniest thing he had heard...” (178).

Later, when she has an argument with his girlfriend Dolores and gets cut, the only time he feels perplexed is when he realizes she has indeed been cut. Despite the love she had received from Daddy Clidell, Angelou's need to feel validation from her father was so intense that she writes, “It only lasted a precious minute, but I managed once to see my father

perplexed./ “Cut.” It was so delicious. I didn’t mind draining away into the plaid seat cushions” (190). However, later, when her wound has been treated he goes back to his indifferent self and Angelou wonders,

How could I bear their contempt or their pity? If I disappeared Dad would be relieved, not to mention Dolores. I hesitated nearly too long. What would I do? Did I have the nerve to commit suicide? (192)

Apart from the men in her family, Angelou sought for a home in a lover. She had the “affliction suffered by most young women” (330). She wrote about how she imagined that he would walk into her life, “see me and fall everlastingly in love... I looked forward to a husband who would love me ethereally, spiritually, and on rare (but beautiful) occasions, physically” (330). Her need for validation seems to have continued, and so did her search for it. However, while Angelou was traumatised by sexual abuse in her past, she was also “confused by the fact that she also enjoyed the physical intimacy and longed for it, as it was lacking in her other relationships” (Harisunker 215). This had distorted her idea about love and intimacy. Owing to this, despite her magnificent self, Angelou would conform to the wishes and desires of her partners, ignore her feelings almost completely and turn submissive for their love, attention, but most importantly, their validation. While her sexual misadventure with a teenager and her pregnancy was is one such example, one of the most extreme examples of this is the fact that at one point in her life she willingly worked as a prostitute just because her partner told her to.

Angelou got married three times. Tosh Angelos was one of the most important of them all, as when it came to changing her name she chose to adopt his surname – “Angelos”, with a minor modification. Tosh Angelos was a Greek sailor she had met at the record shop she worked in, in San Francisco. They stayed married for three years. Angelou quit her passion and her career and religiously turned into a “housewife” for a while, since Tosh wanted it. She

writes,

We rented a large flat, and on Tosh's orders I quit my job. At last I was a housewife....

My life began to resemble a Good Housekeeping advertisement. I cooked well-balanced meals and molded fabulous jello desserts. My floors were dangerous with daily applications of wax and our furniture slick with polish. (416)

Angelou's life had been a whirlwind of events and places. Tosh gave her the stability she needed. More importantly, he gave her the validation she required. He called her "beautiful", "cooking received his highest praise and he laughed at my wit" (416). Apart from this, his reliability was the anchor that kept her going through the relationship, despite his occasional angry outbursts. The same pattern continues in both her other marriages, with Vusi Make and Paul du Feu. However, like every other trauma or disrupting event in her life Angelou accepts even failed marriages as a means to learn something about life. In *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas* Angelou reveals that "she actually learns a lesson in life after her marriage collapses; that she should always be focused and learn to be independent, and not allow her life to be solely dependent on a man" (Tettah 57).

However, it is interesting to note that despite looking for the feeling of home in everyone around her – her family, places and in the various men who were a part of her life, with time Angelou discovers it within herself. In *Letter to My Daughter*, a collection of letters she wrote to all her daughters in the world (despite the fact that she did not have a daughter of her own), she writes, "We may act sophisticated and worldly but I believe we feel safest when we go inside ourselves and find home, a place where we belong and maybe the only place we really do." (*Letter to My Daughter*)

3.3.5. Tracing the influence of women in Angelou's life

Throughout Angelou's journey through life as a Black woman, she was surrounded by powerful women – independent, with a mind of their own, with the courage to live their lives

the way they thought well and with a humour that allowed them to celebrate whatever they had. Be it her dear grandmother – Annie Henderson, her mother – Vivian Baxter, or Mrs. Bertha Flowers – the person who gifted her her voice back, these women played a significant role in shaping Angelou into the woman she became.

Throughout her multi-volume autobiography, she uses the plot of a journey from self-knowledge to self-worth. Her grandmother may have been the main influence on her connection with the spiritual and the sermonising techniques. It was her grandmother who taught her the value of words and religious conviction is also portrayed as the adjustment of the self and the tongue. Her childhood experience is full of rigid laws that governed every aspect of their life. These laws were about the verbal virtuosity, cleanliness and obedience, and about performance in the school and church. She ran a successful store and commanded respect from the neighbourhood including the whites. Given the racial and gender discrimination of the society at that time, according to little Maya, her grandmother had won. While talking about Annie Henderson, Maya writes,

I saw only her power and strength. She was taller than any woman in my personal world, and her hands were so large they could span my head from ear to ear. Her voice was soft only because she chose to keep it so. In church, when she was called upon to sing, she seemed to pull out plugs from behind her jaws and the huge, almost rough sound would pour over the listeners and throb in the air. (47)

In later parts of the autobiography, Maya also observes that the missionary ladies of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church helped Momma prepare the pork for sausage and the men chopped off the larger pieces of meat and laid them in the smoke house to begin the smoking process (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 23). With the tone of a folk preacher, her descriptions underline the harmony of the entire community, richness and warmth of the Southern African-American life even in the midst of oppression and poverty.

Many years later, while at San Diego as a 17-year-old single-mother of a two-month-old baby boy attending Sunday 'go-to-meetings', Angelou says,

I understood them all. I was part of that crowd. The fact of my Southern upbringing, the fact of my born Blackness meant that I was for the rest of my life a member of that righteous band, and would be whether or not I went to Church again" (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 260).

She met her during her years of mutism. Mrs. Bertha Flowers was the icon of feminism for Angelou. She was a well-educated woman, who was a well-educated woman, was financially independent. Her admiration for Mrs. Flowers is evident when she writes, "She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her" (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 74). To Angelou she was their "side's answer to the richest white woman in town" (74). Sickels writes that Mrs. Flowers imparts the feelings of black pride and love for literature in Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou writes about Mrs. Flowers, "It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself" (95). She says,

Part of what helps Maya survive the racism around her and feel more confident in herself is her connection to the black community and to the strong role models offered by her grandmother and Mrs. Bertha Flowers, "the aristocrat of Black Stamps," who takes Maya under her wing and coaxes her out of her shell - "another important turning point in the development of the autobiographer's consciousness". (Sickles 29)

It is through Mrs. Flowers that Angelou finds her road to recovery in words. She drew her to words, and speaking through the music imbedded in poetry. Angelou had been reading and memorising voraciously. However, Mrs. Flowers brought to her the experience of giving those words life through sound. By doing so, she not only gave Angelou her voice back, but

even gave words a new meaning – that it is not just dangerous; that one could make the world a more beautiful place through words and voice. Angelou writes, “She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be” (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 74).

While there were other women around Angelou too, her mother, Vivian Baxter, was the most critical female figure in Maya’s growth. Pelayo writes, “It is against [Vivian’s] maternal persona and role model that Maya the narrator keeps measuring her accomplishments” (Pelayo 132). Due to the years of distance from her, when Maya meets Vivian Baxter, she cannot immediately see a mother in her. She is blown away by her charisma and her beauty. In her work, she says, “To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colours of the rainbow” (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 49).

When Maya meets her mother for the first time in many years, at the age of 7, when her father comes to Stamps and takes her and her dear brother away to her, she is mesmerised by her beauty. In the work, a little earlier, she mentions how she cannot picture her mother. The sense of abandonment and the years of distance between them had blurred her features and eventually left a blank face for Maya to recollect whenever she tried to picture her. In the work, Maya says, how she often filled that blank space with the words “M O T H E R” (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 44).

However, when she meets her, she is blown away by her energy and her spirit. Even in her interviews in her later years, Angelou was often asked about the amount of adoration with which she wrote and spoke about her mother – a someone due to which Angelou felt abandonment, in whose house she was later raped by her then boyfriend (Mr. Freeman).

Angelou says that recognised the love that she carried within herself, for her. She acknowledged, accepted, appreciated and celebrated that love.

It took seven autobiographies for Angelou to talk about her mother. However, her relationship with her was one of the most crucial ones that helped shape her personality into what the world remembers her today. For most part of her life, she called Vivian “Lady”. To Maya, Vivian did not conform to the standards of beauty that a mother might have. She says, “My mother’s beauty literally assailed me. Her red lips... split to show even white teeth and her fresh-butter color looked see-through clean... I immediately knew why she had sent us away. She was too beautiful to have children. I had never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called “Mother”” (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 40-50).

When a woman turns into a mother, the societal expectation from her, with regard to her physical appearance, her personality changes. A mother is expected to be a giver. That is the only identity that a patriarchal society allows a woman, once she attains womanhood. This, apparently normalised idea appears jarringly disturbing, when Maya – then, a thirteen year fails to mentally associate the idea of motherhood to a woman because she fails to conform to the unhealthy standard that the society ideally tries to place “mothers” in.

While Angelou writes, "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat." (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*) in her Preface, with time, she realises that her mother had dared to be an individual first. She was a beautiful and fiercely independent woman who knew how to support herself. She did not shy away from non-traditional professions either. She was a professional gambler and had also been a merchant seaman.

Later, it is her mother who gives her the courage to live her life as a celebration despite anything at all. She accepts her teen pregnancy. Angelou writes, “There was no overt or subtle

condemnation. She was Vivian Baxter Jackson. Hoping for the best, prepared for the worst, and unsurprised by anything in between” (220). She gave her the space to not just live, but thrive and it is because of this that while she accepts that she was a terrible mother for a child, she calls her the perfect mother for a teenager.

Women undergo a constant pressure to adhere to arbitrary set of standards just to fit in – to be perceived as the idea that that particular standard stands for – to be accepted. This societal pressure transcends differences, however, in several cases, they become a means to protect oneself from society’s tireless eyes of surveillance. In her collection of feminist essays, *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay writes:

This tension—the idea that there is a right way to be a woman, a right way to be the most essential woman—is ongoing and pervasive. We see this tension in socially dictated beauty standards—the right way to be a woman is to be thin, to wear makeup, to wear the right kind of clothes (not too slutty, not too prudish—show a little leg, ladies), and so on. Good women are charming, polite, and unobtrusive. Good women work but are content to earn 77 percent of what men earn or, depending on whom you ask, good women bear children and stay home to raise those children without complaint. Good women are modest, chaste, pious, submissive. Women who don’t adhere to these standards are the fallen, the undesirable; they are bad women. (Gay)

As a means to escape the pain of inferiority of her black appearance, that had been popularised, she takes refuge in her imagination by hoping that she is living just an ugly dream and that, one day she would wake up to her beautiful, long, blonde hair and her blue eyes, and would be the object of envy of everyone who had dared to imagine that she was the black girl. This is an idea that is plated carefully in the minds of the oppressed individuals; however, this

does not remain restricted to just them. It becomes an idea that infects everyone. Angelou recognises this. In her work, she writes,

The fact 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. (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 209)

Vivian not only stood strong during her pregnancy, but even took care of her son – Clyde (who later, renamed himself as Guy), so that she could explore her creative side, explore her professions as an artist and even tour through Europe for the same. With time, when Angelou grows more and more accustomed to motherhood and lives through immense guilt for having left Guy alone, her understanding of her mother's choices becomes even more clear to her. She not just grows to respect it, but even draws strength from it. The non-conformation of her mother was an immense influence on Angelou. It was one of the primary reasons that she could even allow herself to dare and remain unique in her own ways and explore and celebrate life the way she did.

3.4. Conclusion

Due to the trauma that the community underwent as a whole, black women were faced with double oppression – of race and of gender. Angelou began her journey as a woman, with insecurity and fear, but eventually grew to accept the colour of her skin, her sexual abuse and her 'odd' professions as a mere part of her journey of life. She was deeply influenced by those around her – by not just their presence but even their absence. The absence of her father and the act of act committed on her by Mr. Freeman left a lasting impression on her and even

distorted her perception on love and physical intimacy. This, along with her need to feel validated as a person pushed her to get involved with several men – each time, with the hope to find her ‘prince charming’. This even led her to turn submissive, in an attempt to be accepted and loved. She did have several lovers, and three failed marriages. She did not find a home in another person, but as the years progressed, she found it in herself.

While in most cases, she learnt lessons for life from men, she derived strength from the women in her life. Her magnificent grandmother, her beautiful mother and Mrs. Bertha Flowers. They had a massive impact on Angelou’s life. In many ways, they were the women she looked up to and aspired to grow into. She adored the strength in her grandmother, despite the racial fear she carried within her so deeply. Mrs. Flowers taught her that words were not to be feared; that they could create something beautiful too. She gave her back her voice. Her mother gave her the courage and support to dare and be fully herself. It is from her, that learns to not fear non-conformity but to celebrate her own unique journey.

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Chapter IV: Reading through Pain: Narration of Pain

4.1. Introduction

4.2. Trauma and subjectivity

4.3. Angelou and sublimation

4.4. Black Autobiographies as an act of revolution

4.5. Words as a means to healing

4.6. Post-traumatic growth – tracing trauma to growth in Angelou's work

4.7. Conclusion

4.1. Introduction

In their seminal entry on sublimation titled *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1967), Laplanche and Pontalis write, “In the psychoanalytic literature, the concept of sublimation is frequently called upon; the idea answers to a basic need of the Freudian doctrine and it is hard to see how it could be dispensed with” (Laplanche and Pontalis 433). In this context, the different types of coping mechanisms or defense mechanisms resulting from trauma in the works of Maya Angelou have been studied extensively. However, until now, no major study has focussed on the role of sublimation in her works.

Angelou was the first African American women to discuss and write about her personal life so publicly, with much courage, strength and authenticity. Angelou’s autobiographies shine though because of the honest portrayal of the time, the community, the realities faced by the African Americans at the time, the truth of the American society, along with her own place in it all. Her work gives her a voice, but also gives a voice to several others – members of the Black community, Black women, women in general, and anyone who has had a tryst with heart wrenching trauma. Through her autobiographies, Angelou not just expresses her personal trauma but also the collective trauma of several communities. In one of the interviews with *The Black Scholar*, she had written, “If one has the fortune, good or bad, to stay alive one endures, but to continue to write the books and get them out - that's the productivity and I think that is important to link with the endurance.” (Angelou *The Black Scholar*)

Psychology studies the causality of the human behaviour while literature depicts it through fiction. In a way, these two can be considered as forms of behavioural science that are interrelated to each other. In this context, research on literary works involves understanding of the quintessential aspects of the literary work and the mind responsible for that work. In other words, a literary work is a product of the psychological condition of the author and thus

studying literary work is a means to recreate and understand the inner world of the author retrospectively. Thus, a literary work utilizes aspects of psychology that help present characters, expression of moods and emotions.

In line with the general understanding, primary focus of discussions on trauma is on the preliminary consequence of the same – PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). However, multitude of responses can follow a traumatic event that includes biological and psychological alterations in a person. According to Freud, ‘trauma’ is a result of an extensive breach in the protective shield by an external stimulus. Such traumatic experience can be relational or non-relational in nature. Relational trauma includes incidents involving close relationships such as marital violence, parental violence, sexual violence and suicide related grief. Non-relational trauma involves unanticipated events such as road accidents, fires, disaster or war. While some traumatic experiences create an intense image of the reality and drown in the depths of depression, others fight the natural current and rise out of it in flames of glory. They are re-born to new life and vigour. These are generally categorised under response mechanism after a traumatic experience. In other words, trauma is a subjective reaction to objective events.

4.2. Trauma and subjectivity

Trauma is a subjective and personal reaction that a person has, to an objective event. It affects different people differently based on their unique past and incidents they have undergone. Therefore, each person responds differently and uniquely. The term “trauma” signifying a state of emotional shock scaring the psyche of an individual can be compared to a wound that is invisible to the naked eye – a “hidden wound”, or a “silent scream”. Such a wound affects the core beliefs of that individual, due to the "temporal gap" and “a dissolution of the self” (Balaev 150), says Balaev. Thus, showing that the trauma could result in one’s

identity being torn to shreds; the principles of the world one lives in, of the people around one shredded; and one's purpose in this world turning into a painfully, incomprehensible chaos.

In their seminal entry on sublimation titled *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1967), Laplanche and Pontalis write, "In the psychoanalytic literature, the concept of sublimation is frequently called upon; the idea answers to a basic need of the Freudian doctrine and it is hard to see how it could be dispensed with" (Laplanche and Pontalis 433). In this context, the different types of coping mechanisms or defense mechanisms resulting from trauma in the works of Maya Angelou have been studied extensively. However, until now, no major study has focussed on the role of sublimation in her works.

Cathy Caruth says that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Balaev 151). In several cases, when one is traumatised, one might undergo PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Caruth writes,

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the even. (Caruth *Trauma* 4).

It has been popularly contended that studying an individual's pain through the narratives that the individual presents, is a faulty attempt. In *Worlds of Hurt*, Kali Tal writes, "Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception" (Tal 15). In his

work, Michael Baleav writes, “Traumatic experience becomes unrepresentable due to the inability of the brain, understood as the carrier of coherent cognitive schemata, to properly encode and process the event. The origin of traumatic response is forever unknown and unintegrated; yet, the ambiguous, literal event is ever-present and intrusive” (Balaev 151).

Understanding the trauma-caused reactions and responses is primary to extrapolate the same to literary studies. In this context, this section refers to standard protocols and information provided by Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US) in their book titles *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*. Initial reactions to trauma vary in type and intensity based on individual. Some individuals may not show any initial reactions to trauma which by itself is due to the confusion and shock they experience. Majority of survivors exhibit immediate response and resolve without any long-term consequences. Some may exhibit sub-clinical or non-diagnostic symptoms. Some of the common reactions and responses include the following: emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioural, social and developmental. These are not indicators of mental illness or mental disorder.

Emotional responses may include, depression, mood swings, anxiety, vulnerability and emotional detachments from anything that requires emotional reactions. Cognitive responses includes flashbacks, self-blame, preoccupation with event etc. Behavioral reactions may include avoidance of event reminders, social relationship disturbances, engagement in high-risk behaviours, withdrawal etc. Considering the varied types of traumas and trauma responses, Maya Angelou’s life is filled with many traumatic instances. Her autobiographies are not an easy read for someone seeking to escape their harsh reality. She presents a honest account into the then American culture, malpractices, societal beliefs and contradictions. She narrates inviting active participation, expecting to trigger a reaction from the reader. One of the most referred response to trauma by Maya Angelou is her selective mutism after her abuser’s condemnation. She writes:

“He was gone, and a man was dead because I lied. (...) I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leechlike to sound. I began to listen to everything. I probably hoped that after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down, deep in my ears, the world would be quiet around me.” (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 69)

4.4. Angelou and sublimation

Her work is not just a Bildungsroman narrative of her struggle from her childhood to her adulthood. She uses her autobiography to share and re-structure the collective memory of the African American community in general, when she writes:

O Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us?
Who will compute the lonely nights made less lonely by your songs, or the empty pots
made less tragic by your tales? (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 143)

Unlike most writers, Angelou does not end her autobiography with just one book, but goes on to write seven of them. In an interview with *Time*, Angelou had said that when her time comes, she'd still, probably be writing. She says, “I’ll probably be writing when the Lord says, ‘Maya, Maya Angelou, it’s time’” (Luscombe). Writing, and art in general, was not a destination for Angelou, but a way of life. However, if one looks at her autobiographies closely, one would realise that they do not follow the common structure of a beginning, a middle and an end. In “Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity”, Mary Jane Lupton writes, “What distinguishes, then, Angelou's autobiographical method from more conventional autobiographical forms is her very denial of closure (Lupton 258). Except her first and last autobiographies, all her autobiographies end at the beginning of her next and leave the readers hanging. She celebrates life – all of it – in her work elaborately and meticulously—without leaving a trace behind. In her *Black Scholar* interview, Angelou had said,

A great writer only writes one book every five years. Says who? Who made that rule? I don't believe it... I love life, I love living life and I love the art of living, so I try to live my life as a poetic adventure, everything I do from the way I keep my house, cook, make my husband happy, or welcome my friends, raise my son; everything is a part of a large canvas I am creating, I am living beneath. (*The Black Scholar*).

There is a continuity, even in the titles of her works. From *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name* (1969), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1974), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), the titles of her works present a journey from being caged to setting oneself free. In "Sufferings and Survival: A Study of Maya Angelou's Autobiographies" (2017), K. Sormanbiga correctly points out,

The titles in all her autobiographies introduce the major metaphors that will run through all her life. They tend to portray their lives of struggle against the white oppressor and their efforts to destroy the cage of racism and slavery. It is not really the struggle of the bird; it is the exploration of the cage, the gradual discovery of its boundaries, the loosening of certain bars that she can slip through when the keepers' back are turned. (Sormanbiga 194)

She used her own discovery of the power of words and her individual identity to enable other Black women who may be experiencing similar traumas. One interesting observation has been made before is her association with the concept of "home". "Home" does not resonate with her and her community who were either in male-dominated spaces or cannot afford one. Instead, she associates Africa as home in her autobiography the place of her ancestors and identity. In her sixth autobiography, she elaborates this as follows:

“There was an obvious justification for my amorous feelings. Our people had always longed for home. For centuries we had sung about a place not built by hands, where the streets were paved with gold, and were washed with honey and milk. There the saints would march around wearing robes and jeweled crowns. There we would study war no more and, more important, no one would wage war against us.” (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 902)

Maya Angelou’s narration of the African-American history has a significant role to play. Her style of narration that is masked with the burden of slavery, amplifies the sense of insecurity prevailing in the society. This is important in the context as this led a lot of African-Americans, including Maya Angelou, to look for support from the Almighty through focus on spirituality. In a way, their suffering helped the African-American community find sustenance and support through their spiritual conviction. Thus, religion became a sort of therapy self-designed to mend themselves from the stress of their physical and mental survival. Blacks were not easily permitted to attend to Christian preaching and was limited and controlled from the early days of slavery. In these troubling times, Black folk preachers became one of the most influential people within the African-American religious conviction. It is interesting to note how Maya Angelou’s narratives adapt the tone and form of a folk preacher. This is one of the many reasons that her words are received and perceived by others as something powerful and driven. It demonstrates the spirit of resurgence and desire to find happiness, within the African American psyche.

Maya Angelou often uses the ‘call and response’ as an important feature in her works which is also a feature of African-American sermons. This feature is categorized by the use of Biblical language similar to that of a sermon. Being a spiritual believer herself, Maya Angelou’s initiation into writing autobiographies too fit this ‘call and response’ narrative feature. The “call” came to her in the late 60s through her friend Robert Loomis, editor,

Random House. When he first suggested that she write her autobiography, Maya Angelou emphatically rejected the idea.

Later, James Baldwin had suggested Loomis to pose an impossibility before Angelou. He knew that she would not be able to resist a challenge – that she would make it happen. Following this, after some months, Loomis tried to entice her again by posing it as a challenge. He declared, “... I must say, you may be right not to attempt an autobiography, because it is nearly impossible to write autobiography as literature. Almost impossible” (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 1165). The trick worked. Angelou perceived this as a challenge – a something that she needed to tackle. She replied to him with, “I’ll start tomorrow” (1165). Her decision to write was influenced partly by her spiritual beliefs and she adapts a sermonising technique to position the core of her autobiographical character within the world of racism and sexism.

Among all of Maya Angelou’s autobiographies, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* caught the most attention of the readers and critics for having profound moral stance and expression of resistance to major societal issues like racism, sexism and inequality. Her trauma lead to a response that enabled others to fight for themselves. However, there have been many activists and novelists who talked about the problems of the society based on their own experience, but what made Maya Angelou’s work unique and extraordinarily influential? To understand this, we need to first grasp the basics of psychological responses of humans to trauma.

Apart from the above-mentioned categories of trauma responses, the psychological responses are usually categorized into two major types namely: coping mechanism and defense mechanisms. In this regard, Phebe Cramer says-

...the following criteria may be used to differentiate between defense and coping mechanisms: Coping mechanisms involve a conscious, purposeful effort, while defense mechanisms are processes that occur without conscious effort and without conscious awareness (i.e., they are unconscious). Also, coping strategies are carried out with the intent of managing or solving a problem situation, while defense mechanisms occur without conscious intentionality; the latter function to change an internal psychological state but may have no effect on external reality, and so may result in nonveridical perception, that is, in reality distortion. (Cramer 919)

Although the author suggests the above-mentioned criteria to differentiate between defense and coping mechanisms, they also note that there are multiple views on the same varying in their inclusiveness. However, these criteria are basic and would suffice for one to understand the differences. One of the major concepts developed by Freud and is also considered a defense mechanism is sublimation. It is often associated with artistic expressions.

Sublimation is considered as a matured defense mechanism and it is defined as channelling of feelings, desires and impulses (usually sexual or aggressive nature) that are unacceptable into socially accepted and positive activity. Such resultant activities are often creative. Famous neurologist and psychoanalyst Freud believed that sublimation as a mature defense mechanism that only few were able to follow. The basic idea that instincts and impulses can be redirected towards other useful activities has been known for centuries, usually in the context of focussing one's energy or mind. However, Freud brought out that these instincts and impulses were recognised as forbidden and socially unacceptable thus leading to their alteration into socially acceptable activities.

This conceptualization of sublimation was not accepted until recently as there was no scientific proof. Other concepts of defense mechanisms such as projection, repression, denial,

rationalization etc were scientifically documented in number of studies. After deliberating and analysis of decades of scientific research, Cohen and Kin conclude saying:

Recent research has come to support the existence of sublimation as a defense mechanism, at least among some parts of the population...Forbidden or suppressed thoughts and feelings are moved to the less conscious areas of the mind, where they are likely transformed by loose, associational thinking processes and then displaced into productive, creative work. (Cohen)

This scientific understanding falls in line with the concept noted by Freud where he talked about sublimation in the context of production and performance arts. He elaborated that artists usually work on materials of their own unconscious conflicts thus rendering the same to the audience in culturally acceptable symbolic form. Later in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, Ernst Kris furthered this understanding by involving the idea of artistic sublimation as one of the forms of defense mechanisms as it helps neutralize the potentially dangerous drives or urges. In contrast to Freud's association of sublimation to sexual drives, in his chapter - 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse (1929), Melanie Klein associated sublimation as a method to transform infantile anxieties. Freud describes the act of engagement of conscious mind as sublimation and further categorizes the domains to help construct productivity,

Sublimation of the drives is a particularly striking feature of cultural development, which makes it possible for the higher mental activities – scientific, artistic and ideological – to play such a significant role in civilized life.. (Freud *Civilisation and its Discontent*)

However, the representation of trauma and its reliability has been long debated. In *Trauma: Explorations of Memory*, Cathy Caruth writes that the problem of trauma is in the

structure of how it is experienced or received, since “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time” (Caruth *Trauma* 4). She writes about a gap in the memory, with relation to that experience, due to the overwhelming effect that it might have had on the person. Therefore, trauma is often understood as an, overall, incomprehensible event, a person might have several versions of the experience in one’s mind. However, the brain seeks to fill this gap and comprehend. The several symptoms of PTSD, like nightmares and flashbacks are the brain’s attempts to restructure the memory of the event and to discover the true pattern. This is where writing about trauma plays a significant role. In *Trauma in Contemporary Literature: Narrative and Representation* (2014), Marita Nadal and Mónica Calvo write,

Belief in the power of voicing of the traumatic experience as a first step in the cure of trauma by transforming the traumatic memories into a coherent narrative was already promoted by such pioneering figures in the field of psychology as Freud and Breuer in their famous theory of the “talking cure”. (qtd in Nadal and Calvo 76)

Research suggests that writing, especially expressive writing could reduce one’s blood pressure significantly and therefore, reduce stress levels. In *Upside*, Jim Renden writes that writing forces one to deliberately ruminate on the experience of trauma, allowing and assisting the person to discover a compressible narrative. According to Pennbaker, assigning or representing the experience with words, with language, is an important and necessary step towards understanding an experience. He writes,

Life-threatening events activate the amygdala, the brain’s fear centre. Those memories are red hot with emotion but lack language and context. Writing helps survivors to label the experience, attaching language to it that allows survivors to understand and process the event instead of leaving it as some alert adrift in our neural wiring. Once that’s done,

people can assign it meaning, some level of coherence, and give the event a structure and place in their lives. (Rendon 116)

4.5. Black Autobiographies as an act of revolution

Black autobiographies are an act of revolution. In “Black Autobiographies as History and Literature” (1973), John W. Blassingame writes, “One of the most important forums blacks have used to state their positions, to leave a record of their resistance, to inspire future generations, and to promote their national development has been the autobiography” (Blassingame 2). To tell one’s story, to state one’s ideas and to express one’s story is a means of establishing their identity. It is a testimony of the fact that despite being enslaved, captured, humiliated, mistreated, abused, they had the courage to still stand tall with courage and hope. They refused to believe that the treatment they were meted with, was their ultimate fate. They dared to exist, survive and to speak. These autobiographies were supported, encouraged, and sponsored by the abolitionists with the belief that the first-person narrative of slaves having escaped from their tyrannical masters and found freedom on their own would empower the slaves and would move the whites profoundly. Blassingame writes,

The autobiography had therapeutic (*sic*) value for both authors and readers. It was a vehicle blacks used to express their true feelings without having them distorted by whites. It imposed some order on an irrational world. Black readers were overjoyed that a fellow sufferer had "attacked" their white oppressors, proved the race's moral superiority over whites, and demonstrated that the readers' failures were not due to personal shortcomings, but rather to racial discrimination. It was comforting for Afro-Americans to read the autobiographies for in them a black man was a Christian in a sea of infidels, an egalitarian among aristocrats, and a democrat among tyrants. (Blassingame 7)

All these narrators sought to present stories and identities that were popularly considered non-existent for convenience purposes. However, apart from just standing tall as symbols of survival, Black autobiographies also celebrates Blackness. They spoke about the grit, bravery, humour and their artistic abilities. This began with the autobiographies of Fredrich Douglas – *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, published in 1845. This was later reworked and republished in 1855 as *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Even though, initially, the whites refused to believe that a black man could write anything even remotely close to such an eloquent work of art, it became a bestseller. These announcements of courage and these stories of hope were received as romantic tales of bravado by the Whites. They were best sellers. However, romantic or not, those works did carve a place for themselves and for the voice of the Blacks in the history of the world.

In *Sisters of Yam* (1993), bell hooks writes, “Healing takes place within us as we speak the truth of our lives” (hooks 29). The very strength of trauma lies in silence. If one perceives this idea, from the perspective of cultural trauma, silence is a tool often used by the oppressors to maintain a control over the oppressed. The constant attempts of Mrs. Henderson to keep her granddaughter silent, and out of the way of their white oppressors, the fear that they express when Bailey refuses to step aside on the road to let the whites go, are a direct expression of the intergenerational discipline that the Blacks in America had come to learn as a means of self-preservation. On the other hand, the silence that Angelou adopts when Tosh Angelos asks her to stay at home and be the perfect “housewife”, because she becomes too “enchanted with security” (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 418) to see how it was a prison, or when she is overcome with shame and guilt and chooses to go into selective mutism are an expression of the silence that one seeks refuge in, as a means to stay protected from even oneself. Silence, particularly around personal trauma, is triggered by social stigmatization and shame. As Kennedy writes, “Stigma and stigmatization play a critical role in shaping survivors’

thoughts, feelings, and behaviours as they recover; their risk of revictimization; and their help-seeking and attainment process". (qtd. in Kennedy and Prock 3)

Maya Angelou went through selective mutism after her sexual trauma, for five long years. The confession little Rittie makes in the court is a rebellion against the oppression of doubt, confusion and the silence that results from it. However, the mysterious death of Mr. Freeman makes Maya doubt herself, and sends her spiralling down the path of self-blame and survivor's guilt. As a child, and as a survivor overwhelmed with guilt, she thinks,

...if I talk to someone that person might die too. Just my breathe, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended.

I had to stop talking. (*Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 70)

She met Mrs. Flowers when she and her brother went back to live with their grandmother in the south, after five years of living with their mother in California. Mrs. Flowers was a educated woman who was inspirational female figure to Maya. Mrs. Flowers was the one who sowed the seeds of love for literature in Maya Angelou's mind. She impressed the importance of reading to the traumatic young kind with sad heart and lost mind. Reading helped Maya Angelou come out of her shell and to start speaking. Maya Angelou's voice was set free. In one of her interviews when Angelou was asked about those years of selective mutism, she says,

I believe that my brain reconstructed itself during those years. I believe that the areas in the brain which provide and promote physical speech had nothing to do. I believe that the synapses of the brain, instead of just going from A to B, since B wasn't receptive, the synapses went from A to R. You see what I mean? (Moore)

4.5.1. *Words as Angelou's means to healing*

Maya Angelou says that Mrs. Flowers was one of the few gentlewomen that she has ever met. Mrs. Flowers remained as a benchmark human being throughout Maya's life. Maya says Mrs. Flowers made her feel proud of her identity and accept herself for who she was. Mrs. Flowers imbibed the power and feelings of Black pride and self-esteem by helping her to regain her voice by saying, "Now no one is going to make you talk - possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals." (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 78)

This was something new for Maya and changed her way of seeing the world forever. Mrs. Flowers could cajole Maya from the void of fear and silence into the belief that words were beautiful and that the sound of a human voice speaking them was like giving those words a shade of colour and paint meaning. She tells her, "Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That's good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning" (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 78). Mrs. Flowers also gave Maya few books thus creating the love and passion of poetry and books. When Mrs. Flowers read poems to Maya, she would realise she was right. The words on the book and the words she heard spoken by her sounded different. She even wondered if they were the same. It felt beautiful to her. Angelou writes,

Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same that I had read? Or were there notes, music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book? Her sounds began cascading gently. I knew from listening to a thousand preachers that she was nearing the end of her reading, and I hadn't really heard, heard to understand, a single word. "How do you like that?"

It occurred to me that she expected a response. The sweet vanilla flavour was still on my tongue and her reading was a wonder in my ears. I had to speak. I said, "Yes, ma'am." It was the least I could do, but it was the most also. "There's one more thing. Take this book of poems and memorize one for me. Next time you pay me a visit, I want you to recite. (78-80)

With time, Maya became more confident to read the poems out and gradually, even began writing her own poems at the age of nine. She drew parallels between Mrs. Flowers and English women portrayed in novels, who are described to walk with freedom and attitude on the moors with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance. She compared her relaxing attitude to those women who would sit in front of roaring fireplaces and drink tea ceaselessly from silver trays full of various eatables. Even though the comparison is steeped in the white stereotype and racial inferiority, little Maya adored how Mrs. Flowers did not feel too different from that, and cherished the fact that she could enjoy her company and her guidance. In her autobiographies, she writes that Mrs. Flowers was unlike any person that she ever met.

Mrs. Flowers not only inspired her to celebrate art and the sound of the human voice, she also gave her the courage and imagination to imagine what it meant to be a powerful and "free" woman - without the shackles of slavery, racism or poverty. She taught Maya the importance of intelligence and awareness, and the importance of being emphatic towards those who continue to remain tied down in illiteracy. Maya writes,

As I ate she began the first of what we later called 'my lesson in living'. She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called

mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generation. (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 79)

Angelou is fondly remembered today, as a writer of several works – poems, essays, screenplays, autobiographies. However, Mrs. Flowers was an important reason why Angelou turned into a writer. It was primarily because of her that Angelou, gradually, developed the passion and the discipline to tell her story; to tell her truth. This helped her greatly in navigating through her trauma. It paved her way to recovery from it. In *Sisters of Yam* (1993), bell hooks writes, “Commitment to truth-telling is thus the first step in any process of self-recovery” (hooks 29-30). In “Writing the Self and Exigencies of Survival: Autobiography as Catharsis and Commemoration” (2018), Mary Grace R. Concepcion writes,

Writing is inextricably linked to the survival and continuation of personal and historical memory. The interplay between the forces of creation and annihilation, life and death characterizes the making of the book: the survival and destruction of the written word is inevitably linked to the survival and destruction of the self. (Concepcion 329)

While both “defense mechanisms and coping strategies are processes that are aroused when there is a situation of psychological disequilibrium” (Cramer 923), they differ at the point of intentionality. While defense mechanisms are primarily a reflexive response to a situation, in an attempt to protect oneself, coping mechanisms are rather deliberate. They are one’s attempt to recover or heal. Sublimation is popularly accepted as a matured defense mechanism wherein one channels one’s pain or rage, or a psychologically disruptive sentiment or urge into a socially acceptable, productive one. Art is one of the many ways that one could sublimate these sentiments or urges.

4.7. Post-traumatic growth – tracing trauma to growth in Angelou’s work

Maya Angelou is known today, as a phenomenal woman who tore through everything that life threw at her. While this is inspirational, it would be unfair to draw a comparison between her and any other artist or person who, may have succumbed to the pain inflicted by their trauma. Trauma is subjective and so is the process of healing. Both of these depend greatly on the one's emotional history, one's core ideas, and assumptions primarily about myself. The environment one dwells in, or gets influenced from also plays a vital role. Maya Angelou was greatly influenced by her grandmother Mrs. Henderson, her tutor Mrs. Flowers, and the books she fell in love with. The constant geographical distance she could give herself from the spaces where she underwent trauma, with to her constant travels, gave her time and space to heal too. However, her journey was no easy one.

In her work, *All My Puny Sorrows* (2014), Miriam Toews writes about the beauty of sublimating pain into an artistic expression. It speaks volumes about the essence and purpose of trauma literature as a whole. She touches upon the crucial element of trauma literature, by writing about the comfort that sublimation provides the receivers and readers with. When Yolandi narrates her recent experiences to her sister, Elfrieda, who is bound to the hospital bed after having undergone a suicide attempt, she remembers a song that she had heard a man sing in the park. She speaks about how even though, the song was about the darkness that is universal, as the man sang, "we all have holes in our lives" (Toews 80), due to sublimation, this harsh truth becomes agreeable to the listeners, who not only appreciate it but even begin to sing it in a chorus. In the work, she writes,

I thought that people like to talk about their pain and loneliness but in disguised ways. Or in ways that are sort of organised but not really. I realised that when I try to start conversations with people, just strangers on the street or in the grocery store, they think I'm exposing my pain or loneliness in the wrong way and they get nervous. But then I saw the impromptu choir repeating the line about everyone having holes in their lives,

so beautifully, so gently and with such acceptance and even joy, just acknowledging it... (Towes 81)

According to Mary Jane Lupton, Maya Angelou's autobiographies are a mix of life events and elements of fiction with vividly conceived characters and careful development of theme, setting, plot and language. She uses the context of dress to express her insecurities and fear of their perception of her. The taffeta dress symbolizes the complexity of Maya Angelou's feelings about her race, her circle and enables her to fantasize herself. Ira Silver states:

People undergoing role transitions must devise ways to retain continuous identities because such periods involve profound changes in both their physical and social landscapes...Objects can stand alone as critical testimony about the self during role transitions because people can invest objects with meanings that give coherence to these otherwise incoherent and unsettled periods in the life course. (Ira Silver 2-3).

Hence, her narrative includes symbolism and plots that are constructed to an extent, her autobiographies still contain true events and commentary on the same. However, it is interesting to note the use of symbolism in her work which may hint the readers about subtle psychological responses of her. Mary Jane Lupton made few observations about the importance of clothing in Maya Angelou's work. She studied the purple taffeta dress mentioned in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Lupton says "Maya's ugly purple frock [is] a sign of her humiliation" (Lupton 104) and points out the frequency of clothes in *Gather Together in My Name* (1974). Maya Angelou symbolizes garments as parts of her personality. She says,

... Easter's early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple throwaway. It was old-lady-long too, but it didn't hide my skinny legs, which had been greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered with the Arkansas clay. The age-faded color made my skin look like dirty mud, and everyone

in church was looking at my skinny legs. (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 8)

Toni Morrison observes that in spite of the disparity in the social acceptance of a Black woman, especially in terms of her appearance, Black women have always perceived themselves as superior to white women. Not superior in race, only superior in their ability to function healthy in the world. Black women may envy white women (their looks, their easy lives, the attention they get from their man); they may fear them (because of the economic control they have over the lives of black women) and even love them (as mothers and servants might); but black women can't respect white women. Black women have no perpetual admiration for white women as capable and accomplished. (Burgess 101)

As the narrative progresses, Angelou displays a sense of confidence in her appearance and in the way she carried it. We find her growing to become more than just another person who is learning to accept and love oneself. She grows to help others do the same. Even with regard to appearance and the dresses, she seeks to inspire and elevate other black women in Stamps. She writes,

[My] neat attire and high headed position was bound to teach the black women watching behind lace curtains how they should approach a day's downtown shopping. It would prove to the idle white women, once I reached their territory, that I know how things should be done. And if I knew, well, didn't that mean that there were legions of Black women in other parts of the world who knew also? Up went the Black Status. (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 289)

Her perception of beauty is largely based on Vivian Baxter's role as her fashionable, beautiful mother. Maya Angelou writes many sections that Baxter as a high self-esteeming personality with an appearance that is beautiful and charismatic. She calls her "a hurricane in

its perfect power” (49). Vivian Baxter becomes a significant reason behind the confidence Angelou grows to have in her own appearance. The conversations they have are bereft of the insecurity that Angelou was so used to living with, in her early life. In one instance when Vivian gets ready for a date, she has a brief conversation with Angelou. She says,

“How do I look?”

“Beautiful.”

She tugged the furs into a more casual drape and laughed, “You only say it ‘cause it’s true.”

Her high heels tapped toward the door in a drumming rhythm. (299)

In his work on *A psychoanalytic enquiry on symbolic function* (2016), Giuseppe Iurato shares his observation as, “Freud conceived symbols as all springing out from unconscious, as a result of primary process whose main aim is to reduce anguish, removing unacceptable ideas and desires” (Giuseppe 2). Symbolic formation can be explained in its widest sense as allowing the deferment (time delay) of the discharge of psychic tensions and/or conflicts produced by stimuli, interposing mental mediators (symbols) between stimuli and responses. In this regard, postponing the gratification or shifting of the desires from forbidden objects to their licit (often material) substitutes can lead to an immediate gratification. To be accurate, the first result of symbolic formation as described above will give rise to sublimation, hence to civilization and (non-material) culture in the Freudian sense. On the other hand, the second result of symbolic formation will reduce to (symbolic) reification at simple and immediate materiality (material culture).

Based on these hints on symbolism from literature and psychology, it is safe to assume that Maya Angelou underwent sublimation post trauma. However, many instances also point to both coping, conscious, strategies and defense, unconscious mechanisms employed to counter the memory and reaction arising from the trauma.

Both the mechanisms are processes that arise in situations of psychological disequilibrium. They both are adaptational processes. Usually, coping mechanisms are aimed to decrease negative effect, to return to normalcy and to solve or manage the problem at hand. On the other hand, defense mechanisms are aimed to ward off excess anxiety, to restore comfortable functioning. Cramer also talks about the intentionality by stating,

In contrast to the definition of a coping strategy as a conscious, effortful intention by the person to handle adversity, defense mechanisms function without any conscious participation on the part of the individual. Their occurrence is not willed; rational decision making is not involved. This distinction between intentional and unintentional acts is also made within the coping domain, where some researchers suggest that the 'habitual coping' processes such as 'habits and automatic behaviours' that occur without intentionality should not be considered as coping strategies. These unintentional habitual coping behaviours, which may involve 'little conscious awareness or control,' are seen as alternative modes of adaptation. These coping modes appear to share, atleast theoretically, certain critical features of defense mechanisms, namely, lack of conscious awareness and lack of intentionality. Thus, within the coping literature, a need for alternative mechanisms of adaptation beyond intentional coping strategies is recognized. (Cramer 925)

Most of the analysis literary work done on Maya Angelou's autobiographies focus mainly on her coping mechanisms or other specific strategies. However, Cramer says that even though there are similarities between coping and defenses, it is important for us to recognize them as two different types of adaptational mechanisms. Coping and defense mechanisms can be clearly differentiated on basis of the psychological process involved and not based on the outcome. People tend to consciously will behaviour changes to deal with stress. However, there could also be unconscious mechanisms involved that do not involve intentional decision

making. However, it is important for us to consider the coexistence of different levels of adaptational mechanisms with some more accessible to conscious recognition than others.

This is the main reason of confusion behind classifying sublimation under defense mechanism or coping mechanism. Upon understanding this, one could fathom the reality of the mixed expression of trauma by Maya Angelou. She was sublimating and simultaneously was using coping mechanisms. This could be the most important pointer to reason the impact of the words of Maya Angelou. To understand more about this, we need to look into finer details of her post-trauma journey.

In most cases, PTSD is a mere diversion on the road to healing and growth. However, even this journey – whether one finds enough respite from trauma, is unable to cope with it or if they grow from it, is as relative as their experience of trauma itself. Even this varies from person to person. In his book, *Upside* (2015), Jim Rendon talks about how deliberate rumination is crucial to one's journey to growth or healing. One of the most important ways to do this is by expressing oneself – either verbally, or through writing. According to Pennebaker, writing is different than talking as a method of healing, since it requires one to delve deeper and into much detail. This is particularly true, in the case of expressive writing. Writing is a secondary process. The primary process to this, is thought. One needs to delve into the idea, re-evaluate it, and find one's patterns or meanings in it, to be able to give them words. This, in the process, makes the idea, event, or incident more comprehensible, sometimes, even to the writer. MacCurdy says that “most traumatic events are stored as non-verbal images in the brain. Thus, when victims speak of traumatic events, they do not produce clear narratives but rather describe pictures and images ‘which remain permanently encoded in their minds’”. (Pinhasi-Vittorio 212)

Maya Angelou response to trauma is an amalgamation of coping and defense mechanisms. This gives her a means to grow with every problem she faced – be it racial, sexual or societal. Through her works, Angelou reveals that she grew psychologically, intellectually, physically as well as spiritually. Tedeschi and Calhoun make observations on five aspects of a person's life to evaluate whether and how much of post-traumatic growth has been achieved - appreciation of life, relationships with others, new possibilities in life, personal strength and spiritual change. This statistical work provides a means to evaluate the extent of one's positive change and is accepted as a standard evaluation method. Although statistics is not relevant here, it is important to note that development of awareness and gaining of strength and wisdom are pointers of growth after trauma. In another similar work the author says that the strength of character is correlated to trauma by stating that although no one would wish traumatic events for themselves or others, but the findings show that their experience is associated with increased character strengths along the lines hypothesized by Tedeschi and Calhoun.

Such effects are usually small and infinitesimal, but not trivial. Regardless of their size, these discoveries are important considering the large number of theories emphasize the psychologically scarring effects of such traumatic events. The possibility that any minimal character benefits is associated with increased exposure to potential trauma adds to a rising literature suggesting that people are more resilient than what theories predict. Hence, we can conclude that the posttraumatic growth can occur following potentially traumatic events. As Peterson et. al. mention in their paper "Strengths of Character and Posttraumatic Growth", terrible events are too common in people's lives but the effects of these events are not uniformly negative and may even include effects on increasing character strength.

In line with this psychological understanding, it is interesting to find parallels with Maya Angelou's life and the strengthening of her character. Having faced and observed

multiple racially discriminatory traumas, her opinions and character strengthened not only to help her deal with it but eventually to help and inspire all Black woman.

Being a Black woman, Maya Angelou faced lot of racial discrimination and developed strong opinion and character towards the same, with time. In an interview with David Dillon, she said, “I speak to the black experience, but I am always talking about the human condition—about what we can endure, dream, fail at and still survive” (qtd. in Gogoi 89). This is a sign of her post-traumatic growth of character strength to an extent that she felt comfortable and confident to inspire more people even outside her community. In *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), she mentions the stark difference in the way she felt in racial America and outside,

I was the heroine in a novel teeming with bejeweled women, handsome men, intrigue, international spies and danger. Opulent fabrics, exotic perfumes and the service of personal servants threatened to tear from my mind every memory of growing up in America as a second-class citizen. (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 825)

Although she criticized white supremacy bluntly, it was not only based on her observation of the ill-treatment the whites undertook, it was also based on the generosity of the blacks that she had observed. In this regard, she says,

We were different. More respectful, more merciful, more spiritual. Whites irresponsibly sent their own aged parents to institutions to be cared for by strangers and die alone. We generously kept old aunts and uncles, grandparents and great grand-parents at home, feeble but needed, senile but accepted as natural parts of natural families. (784)

Her experiences of trauma based on racial discrimination thus enabled her to gain the perspective of equality. W. D. Howells and Bloom both observed that the title of her

autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) was taken from the poem “Sympathy” (1899) of Paul Lawrence Dunbar who influenced and inspired Maya Angelou:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
 When he beats his bars and he would be free;
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings
 I know why the caged bird sings! (Poetry Foundation)

Dunbar's parents were affected by slavery and he worked as an elevator-boy. He was a gifted poet who could capture the pain of being a slave, being held captive against one's wills and dreams, no wonder Maya Angelou resonated with his words and wanted to use it in her autobiography. In line with the psychological concept noted before about the strength of character to see adversity as an opportunity, Maya Angelou expressed her opinion and inspired Black women to view their past slavery trauma as an opportunity to grow. She wrote,

If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have it said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians and blues singers. (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 143)

After her son Guy started going to school, she had to express herself from the position of a black mother among other white mothers. In one of the noted incidents, Guy's school counsellor calls Maya Angelou to inform that Guy was reprimanded for talking about process of sexual intercourse to other ignorant kids. Others found this profane and unacceptable.

However, Maya Angelou knew that Guy was not misbehaving but rather had open mind towards the natural process and did not treat it as a taboo. In this context, she writes,

How could I explain a young black boy to a grown man who had been born white? How could the two women understand a black mother who had nothing to give to her son except a contrived arrogance? If I had an eternity and the poetry of old spirituals, I could not make them live with me the painful moments when I tried to prove to Guy that his color was not a cruel joke, but a healthful design. If they knew that I described God to my son as looking very much like John Henry, wouldn't they think me blasphemous? If he was headstrong, I had made him so. If, in his adolescent opinion, he was the best representative of the human race, it was my doing and I had no apology to make. (Angelou *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 639)

She took pride in the way black community is open and heartfelt compared to the contrasting taboo filled white traditions. She also talks about how a white psychiatrist will never understand the psyche of a black person. This is something we do not anticipate; however, it is true considering the limitations of human mind. She defends the Black psyche by saying that when in America they danced, laughed, procreated for entertainment; they got educated to become lawyers, judges, legislators, teachers, doctors and preachers, but as always, they had to stay under their external masks of a barbarous history embedded into their psyche. She observes that many always commented that Black people were childish, but in America it was contrary. Here, they were matured without experiencing the true freedom of life and youth. She classifies the childish actions as actual exhibition of bravado similar to humming a jazz tune fearlessly while amidst a gathering of the Ku Klux Klan members. (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 947)

Her powerful words and strength brought her opportunities to work with leading personalities of black movement such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. One of her strong narratives includes her opinion on how the needs of a society determines their ethics. In this regard, she wrote,

Stories of law violations are weighed on a different set of scales in the Black mind than in the white. Petty crimes embarrass the community and many people wistfully wonder why Negroes [sic] don't rob more banks, embezzle more funds and employ graft in the unions. 'We are the victims of the world's most comprehensive robbery. Life demands a balance. It's all right if we do a little robbing now.' This belief appeals particularly to one who is unable to compete legally with his fellow citizens. (173)

Maya Angelou recollects the disorientation she felt when she moved from her hometown to the city with widespread prejudice. This taught her valuable lessons and insights towards the realities of black women in America. In this context, she observed that each generation found it more expedient to plead guilty to the charge of being young and ignorant, easier to take the punishment meted out by the older generation. The expectation to grow up instantly was more bearable than the horror of wavering purpose. (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 209)

This could also be counted as an experience of 'displacement' by Maya Angelou. Although, sublimating from her collective state of trauma, helped her gain from these otherwise negative psychological triggers.

In one of her essays titled "*Violence*", Maya Angelou shares her opinion about rape. She expresses her disagreement on the opinion of sociologists that rape is not a sexual act but rather a need for power. She, on the other hand, asserts her opinion as follows,

“We must call the ravaging act of rape, the bloody, heart–stopping, breath snatching, bone crushing act of violence which it is. The threat makes some female and male victims unable to open their front doors, unable to venture into streets in which they grew up, unable to trust other human beings and even themselves. Let us call it a violent unredeemable sexual act.” (Angelou *Letter to My Daughter*)

The act of rape committed by Mr. Freeman was an event that maneuvered her life into what it is known as, today. Her violator – Mr. Freeman, had threatened her into silence. And later, she pushed herself into muteness as a means to redeem herself from a crime she did not even commit. However, it was in this silence that she fell in love with words and expression. So, when she finally began to speak again, she had much to say, and beautifully. No matter how many incidents, Angelou managed to sublimate them. Her pain made her wiser and stronger. She could move from agony to awareness.

Given her experience in living in southern hometown and cities, it is not surprising that Maya Angelou could observe and experience various versions of social responsibilities. The expectations and requirements from a black community to the society was much different from that of the whites. She developed unique strength and perspective to talk and address issues which at times were on both sides. She wrote bluntly about the reality of the skewed society,

...the maids and doorman, factory workers and janitors who were able to leave their ghetto homes and rub the cold-shouldered white world, told themselves that things were not as bad as they seemed. They smiled dishonest acceptance at their mean servitude and on Saturday night bought the most expensive liquor to drown their lie. (*The Collected Autobiographies by Maya Angelou* 371)

Her need for love, the feeling of belonging – a home, and her contorted perception about love haunted her life through and through. But apart from these, there was guilt. Angelou not

only felt guilty that she survived Mr. Freeman, she even blamed herself and her words for his death to the extent that she chose to go mute to 'save' others from herself. She writes, "For nearly a year, I sopped around the house, the Store, the school and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible" (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 74). Her feeling 'dirty' after the rape is because of the shame that comes with it. Her mentions about how no one talked about the event in her house after some time, and she felt as though something unspeakable has occurred. However, this along with the guilt of having got Mr. Freeman killed made her feel guilty about the same.

Another instance when she feels mute, is when under the influence of alcohol or rage, or maybe both, her second husband Vusumzi Make grows aggressive and loud. Angelou writes, "All sounds had diminished to a low, steady, disapproving undertone. I felt as powerless as if I were mute or hypnotized" (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*). The event is a subtle reminder of Mr. Freeman and the event, when rage and violence had overpowered her. Though she is years beyond the time when it was originally occurred, the reminder of the mere energy dynamic that she had experienced in it causes her to feel mute. This is a crucial symptom of PTSD.

However, she was not only guilty about that. When she had to go around the world to explore and establish her creative self, she had to stay away from her son just like she was away from her own mother as a little child. While she battles with the idea, she does leave him in the care of her mother -Vivian, who agrees to care for him. However, when he has an accident and in pain, her memories come back to her. She writes about how she thought she had neglected her son and in turn, ruined him. Her self-accusations and her guilt of not caring for her son like how a 'mother' must, drives her into a fit of frustration. In a painful section, she writes,

I had ruined my beautiful son by neglect, and neither of us would ever forgive me. It was time to commit suicide, to put an end to accusations and guilt. And did I dare die alone? What would happen to my son? If my temporary absence in Europe caused such devastation to his mind and body, what would become of him if I was gone forever? I brought him into this world and I was responsible for his life. So must the thoughts wind around the minds of insane parents who kill their children and then themselves....

I was going mad. (609)

As a child, when her grandmother faces insult in at Dr. Lincoln's office, she uses her imagination to stay afloat. While this touches upon denial to an extent, it is still a way to cope with a situation. In her work, *Hidden in Plain Sight* (2015), Barbara Bennett Woodhouse writes that children are gifted with enough imagination to navigate through a painful experience, even while experiencing it. She writes,

While young children may lack the tools to understand maltreatment, fortunately, they have tools of imagination and instincts for survival that allow them to cope with things beyond their capacity to comprehend. Play can be a serious, even a life-saving business” (Bennett 272).

However, while imagination could help one cope with a situation at hand, research proves that creative expression is an important tool to try and comprehend, and even grow from a painful past. It could be used to try and fill the gap in memory that trauma leaves. In case of Angelou, she tries to compensate for the void she couldn't fill in her personal life with the achievements in her career. Her need to feel loved, especially by her father, the first male figure in her life, was so much that when he goes back to being indifferent to her, despite his girlfriend stabbing her, she writes,

If I disappeared Dad would be relieved, not to mention Dolores. I hesitated nearly too long. What would I do? Did I have the nerve to commit suicide? If I jumped in the ocean wouldn't I come up all bloated like the man Bailey saw in Stamps? The thought of my brother made me pause. What would he do? I waited a patience and another patience and then he ordered me to leave. But don't kill yourself. You can always do that if things get bad enough. (*The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* 192)

Angelou could not get rid of the need to find a validation that she was indeed lovable, and could be appreciated for who she was. She continued to seek it through her life but the means to reach it changed over time. Angelou is known today as a multi-talented woman who was good at everything she did. She is known as a writer, singer, civil rights activist, actor, screenplay writer and so on. In their paper, "A Journey Towards Meaning: An Existential Psychobiography of Maya Angelou", Harisunker & du Plessis write

Angelou's psychological were manifested in her continued determination to prove herself to others and her desire to be seen as perfect, admired, and successful. She desperately wanted love, belonging, and acceptance and believed that she needed to act a certain way in order to achieve these things. Her need for acceptance resulted in her acting in ways that were inauthentic: "I had spent so many years being people other than myself" (Harisunker & du Plessis 216)

In her work, she mentions several instances when her mind pushed her towards the idea of ending her life as a means to save herself from the pain of her existence, of her memories and of the situation she found herself in, in the moment. Apart from validation, she was desperately trying to derive to some meaning for her life and her existence through her career. It is due to this, that when she gets rejected from the army, she says, "My life had no center, no purpose" (308).

Angelou's life has a string of events that added on to her pain. At one point in her life, when she feels incapable of handling it by herself, she rushes to a psychologist. But is unable to speak to him about anything. Her trauma was not just a personal attack from her life, she was a part of a community that was living in subjugation too and the doctor she had gone to was a white. Her mind blends and merges one situation with the other and she imagines that he must probably have "Black servants who wash her underclothes and bring her breakfast on a tray" (610). She is at once aware of the prejudice she would face even from a psychologist, just because she was Black. She was also aware of how he would fail to understand the trauma she had undergone because of that identity and would just consider her case as "another case of Negro paranoia" (611). In a frenzy of thoughts, she goes silent yet again and can only walk out of the chamber. In her work, Angelou describes this as

I started to cry. Yes, I was troubled.... But what could I tell this man? Would he understand Arkansas, which I left, yet would never, could never, leave? Would he comprehend why my brilliant brother, who was the genius in our family, was doing time in Sing Sing on a charge of fencing stolen goods... How would he perceive a mother who, in a desperate thrust for freedom, left her only child, who became sick during her absence? A mother who, upon her return, felt so guilty she could think of nothing more productive than killing herself and possibly even the child?

No, I couldn't tell him about living inside a skin that was hated or feared by the majority of one's fellow citizens or about the sensation of getting on a bus on a lovely morning, feeling happy and suddenly seeing the passengers curl their lips in distaste or avert their eyes in revulsion. No, I had nothing to say to the doctor. I stood up. (610)

When her agony continues, she goes to her older voice coach - Frederick 'Wilkie' Wilkerson. He used to work as a vocal coach to various singers. He was a voice coach to singers

like Roberta Flack and even Paul Robeson. He was Angelou's mentor and had even introduced her to Billie Holliday. She tells him she sees no reason to live. "I'm so unhappy" (611), she writes. Wilkerson deals with this with logic. He teaches her a lesson in gratitude by making her list down everything that she had – the gift of life itself. Later, he says, "Don't ask God to forgive you, for that's already done. Forgive yourself. You're the only person you can forgive. You've done nothing wrong. So forgive yourself" (612). This lesson goes a long way in the growth in Angelou. For, it is with the lesson of acceptance and forgiveness that Angelou's focus eventually transcends from physical to an almost spiritual realm in her later life. It is after this, that in *Letter to My Daughter*, Angelou could write that whenever she lost someone or something in her life she would ask herself,

Did I learn to be kinder,

To be more patient,

And more generous,

More loving,

More ready to laugh,

And more easy to accept honest tears?

If I accept those legacies of my departed beloveds, I am able to say, Thank You to them for their love and Thank You to God for their lives. (*Letter to My Daughter*)

4.8. Conclusion

In "In Memoriam: The Power of Testimony: Maya Angelou", Emilie M. Townes writes, "Her testimony was the power of endurance and hope, and she was relentless in urging us to be our better selves as individuals and as a nation. She also understood the importance of blending determination with play" (Townes 579). Angelou's works are an attempt to find a

cohesive structure to her narrative as against the fragmentation of selves and identities she lives through throughout her life.

The honesty with which she writes the details of her story not just prove that she was a brilliant writer, it also proves how beautifully she had come to accept her life and everything in it. Angelou accepted herself in all her phases. She does not shy away to present the sides of her that are imperfect. Rather, she celebrates them with the same enthusiasm with which she celebrates her brighter, successful self. Her narration presents her journey of growth – from pain and the feeling of being caged inside situations, but more importantly, within herself, to finding a means of release in the act of forgiveness and acceptance. Her works – an act of sublimation allow her to not just re-live and re-tell her story in a structured chronology, it also provides her with the space to teach by example that growth is possible and though it is not a linear journey, it is beautiful still.

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Chapter V: 'Still I Rise': The Rise of the Phoenix

5.1. Introduction

5.2. Summary and Findings

5.3. Limitations of the study

5.4. Scope for future research

5.5. Conclusion

5.1. Introduction

Maya Angelou wrote seven autobiographies and presented her life before the world in all honesty. She did not spare details from her life based on what ‘could’ or ‘could not’ be told. She did not worry about what ‘fit’ or ‘did not fit’ her image as a person.

Her works are testimony to the reality of what a member of the Black community underwent during the time of blatant segregation, but it also presents the subtle acts of microaggression that they get casually subjected to in their everyday lives. Apart from this, she also captures the essence of the doubly oppressed gender group within the community – the life of Black women. However, her work is not only a narration of the cultural trauma that her community and her gender underwent. It is a story of how it affects the lives individuals inside this community. The work is universal and personal at once.

Her journey through trauma and into post-traumatic growth is an inspirational one. She undergoes repeated trauma through her life. The trauma of being a Black girl who struggles to feel confident about herself, the pain of a child separated from her parents, the feelings of abandonment, the horror of being raped before she could even comprehend what rape means, the agony of watching the people she adored cowering before the arbitrariness of the whites, watching her community ‘groan’ under the oppression and brutality of the whites, the struggle of being a single mother, of living through the guilt of not being constantly available to her son, the guilt of seeking herself in her creative pursuits away from him, and so on, were a challenge. But Angelou successfully rises out of them all.

Every time pain pulled her to the ground she bounced back, higher. The work finds that even after remaining buried in survivor’s guilt, after the mysterious death of Mr. Freeman, Angelou found an escape in books and later, in other creative expressions. Be it *Porgy and Bess*, or *Calypso*, joining the Harlem Writer’s Guild, writing and performing poetry, narrating

her life in seven exceptional autobiographies, Angelou's art gave her the space to deliberately ruminate on things that had pained her. It gave her courage to rise above it, and became the beacon lights of hope and inspiration for many others who read them who and find a sense of companionship in them.

The work finds that Maya Angelou grew from fear to courage and developed the right inspirations from the traumas that shaped her psyche in this unique and powerful way. In her electrifying poem, "Still I Rise", Angelou writes, "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide. / Welling and swelling I bear in the tide/...I rise/ I rise/ I rise" (Angelou, *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry* 160). Angelou did rise, and through her writings, on-screen or on-stage performances, and through her activism, gave others the courage to rise too. Linda Wagner-Martin writes,

Maya Angelou convinced her millions of readers that she was herself a vulnerable human being. She was not unlike everyone else alive. In her writing, she carefully revealed those burst bubbles, and the fact that there were many of them. (Wagner-Martin 208)

The most beautiful thing about Angelou is that despite her life being fraught with difficult events, she stands as a symbol of love and hope. Angelou seeks to free herself from being a victim. And she does this through the only means that it is truly possible – by accepting the truth, her place in it, and by birthing enough love for herself and her tormentors. In *Surviving the Angel of Death: Surviving the Angel of Death* (2009), Eva Moses Kor writes, "forgiveness is not so much for the perpetrator, but for the victim". (Kor and Buccieri 132)

As mentioned in the very first quote from Angelou in this work, she worked and wrote to uplift and celebrate the human spirit, to cradle and comfort those with physical or psychological pain – victims of rape, or any form of abuse and abandonment. Her works are

testimony of her attempt at healing not just herself but those who can resonate with her experiences. It is to give them hope that

Love heals. Heals and liberates. I use the word love, not meaning sentimentality, but a condition so strong that it may be that which holds the stars in their heavenly positions and that which causes the blood to flow orderly in our veins. (Angelou *Mom and Me and Mom*)

5.2. Summary and findings

In chapter one, the work merely sets the ground for the further chapters by introducing Angelou, the concept of trauma, PTSD and the theory of post-traumatic growth. It discusses that this work primarily seeks to trace her journey from trauma to growth. It lays the foundation by talking about how at beginning of her first book, the readers find a little black girl filled with insecurities with regard to her cultural existence, while also coming to terms with the challenges of being a girl or a woman, the final work presents a woman who has come to accept herself, her life and everything in it.

The second chapter finds that Angelou was profoundly influenced by the environment she grew up in. She was born into the Black community – a group that was caged inside the colour of their skin and by the perception of their white perpetrators, and even of their own. Like most Black children, she got thrown into the furnace of the unfortunate cultural reality of the then Black Americans. While initially, she only used her imagination and repression to cope, with time she grew more and more expressive, especially after metaphorically shattering the silence she'd been trained in, by breaking the casserole and cups as a mark of defiance and assertion in Mrs. Cullinan's house.

Instead of continuing the tradition of fear, with time Angelou's trauma led her to become comfortable with taking up more space. She became the first Black female streetcar conductor. She joined the Harlem Guild of Writers, travels to Ghana and later even joined the civil rights' movement, working alongside Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. She was even the first Black person to read a poem at the Presidential inauguration. Recently, she has also become the first Black woman to ever feature on the US coin.

From a study of her works, this work finds that with time, she not only accepted her physicality, but even celebrated it, much like her mother did. She embraced her identity and with time gained enough confidence and power to become the mouthpiece for others too. Despite the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, and the knowledge that there was always a possibility for something as brutal as that to befall her, she continued to work for the civil rights' movement. She was the first Black woman to ever write her story with such brutal honesty. This even amounted to the book being banned. She dared to accept what was and even look back at it all with a touch of humour

In chapter three, it finds that Angelou, having grown up as a doubly oppressed individual as an African American woman, who was raped as a little girl before she even understood what rape was or could possibly feel like, she grew up to become a feminist icon who danced to the tune of her own music, despite what the societal expectations of a woman could be. This third chapter finds that due to the trauma that the community underwent as a whole, black women were faced with double oppression – of race and of gender. Angelou began her journey as a woman, with insecurity and fear, but eventually grew to accept the colour of her skin, her sexual abuse and her 'odd' professions as a mere part of her journey of life. She was deeply influenced by those around her – by not just their presence but even their absence. The work finds that absence of her father and the act of act committed on her by Mr.

Freeman left a lasting impression on her and even distorted her perception on love and physical intimacy. This, along with her need to feel validated as a person pushed her to get involved with several men – each time, with the hope to find her ‘prince charming’. This even led her to turn submissive, in an attempt to be accepted and loved. She did have several lovers, and three failed marriages. She did not find a home in another person, but as the years progressed, she found it in herself.

While in most cases, she learnt lessons for life from men, she derived strength from the women in her life. Her magnificent grandmother, her beautiful mother and Mrs. Bertha Flowers. They had a massive impact on Angelou’s life. In many ways, they were the women she looked up to and aspired to grow into. She adored the strength in her grandmother, despite the racial fear she carried within her so deeply. Mrs. Flowers taught her that words were not to be feared; that they could create something beautiful too. She gave her back her voice. Her mother gave her the courage and support to dare and be fully herself. The work finds that it is from her, that learns to not fear non-conformity but to celebrate her own unique journey.

The fourth chapter discovers how her art was her way of sublimating her pain. She became a singer, dancer, screenplay writer, actor and so on. She allowed her personality, her past as well as her present to bloom and blossom in every way that it possibly could. She did not hold back. She had several lovers and three failed marriages. When she began to slip into depression after the death of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, James Baldwin and Robert Loomis nudged her into writing one autobiography. She ended up writing seven of them, and brings her mental narrative to a full circle, through the title of her works and individual plotlines. All the work she has done, have the unmissable vibrance and strength of her spirit that not just healed her in the process, but also continues to inspire millions till today.

It finds that the honesty with which she writes the details of her story not just prove that she was a brilliant writer, it also proves how beautifully she had come to accept her life and everything in it. Angelou accepted herself in all her phases. She does not shy away to present the sides of her that are imperfect. Rather, she celebrates them with the same enthusiasm with which she celebrates her brighter, successful self. Her narration presents her journey of growth – from pain and the feeling of being caged inside situations, but more importantly, within herself, to finding a means of release in the act of forgiveness and acceptance. Her works – an act of sublimation allow her to not just re-live and re-tell her story in a structured chronology, it also provides her with the space to teach by example that growth is possible and though it is not a linear journey, it is beautiful still.

5.3. Limitations of the study

Despite the extensive study of trauma, and post-traumatic growth, this work has been written and worked on by a student of literature in a limited time period. Therefore, it might not be an absolute. Since this area is still new in the field of literature, especially with regard to Maya Angelou, there were not many works to take inspiration from or study. There are several works which seek to study the growth that Angelou had as a result of her trauma, but none use the theory of post-traumatic growth to do it. Also, since this work seeks to study her seven autobiographies and therefore, around 40 years of Angelou's elaborate and eventful life at once, there might be certain aspects which could not be dealt extensively.

5.4. Scope for future research

This work opens a gateway to another route of interdisciplinary study of a literary text – studies through the lens of post-traumatic growth. Angelou's life is wide and varied and every aspect of her journey from trauma and hurt to growth could be a separate study. The environment she lives through, her literal travels, and so on, every aspect that shapes her

through her journey of life is crucial. Each of these could be explored further separately and deeply. Another interesting study could be the narrative she tries to create with the titles of her books – from *I Know How the Caged Bird Sings*, to *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*.

5.5. Conclusion

In her book, *Hidden in Plain Sight* (2015), Barbara Bennett Woodhouse writes, “...words can kill but words can also heal” (Woodhouse 276). Angelou’s works are proof of this. Not only do her work provide a comforting resonance to those who’ve undergone anything similar, her courage to write it down in all honesty, and bluntly, shuns the denial that sheaths the world into a glorious sleep. As a first-hand narrator of her personal experiences, she plays a major role in bringing up discussions on several important matters.

Pain or healing is not a journey. It is not a linear path one could walk on. There is no one true destination at the end of it. Instead, it is a circular journey from pain to healing to another painful instance one could get hit with. However, the beauty of this journey is how one learns to grow stronger with each hit and how efficiently and how much better they deal with those hits. As Angelou says, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” (Angelo)

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