



## CULTURE IN THE NOVELS OF MAYA ANGELOU

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### Abstract

Black History Month is an annual observance for the remembrance of significant people and events in African-American history. It is celebrated in February in the United States and Canada. Youth for Human Rights International celebrates Black History Month in honor of all of those whose courage and determination helped secure the civil rights millions enjoy today. With many people unaware of their rights, the question arises: who will make sure human rights are respected? To answer, we can draw inspiration from those who made a difference and helped create the human rights we have today. These humanitarians stood up for human rights because they recognized that peace and progress can never be achieved without them. Each, in a significant way, changed the world. Maya Angelou is such an inspiration. Her career encompassed a multitude of titles from author, playwright, and poet to stage and screen performer, director, and human rights activist. She is best-known for her autobiographies and a genre known as autobiographical fiction, in which she includes aspects of her personal life in fiction works. Her writings are widely used in schools and universities around the world.

**Key Words:** culture, experiences, human rights, inspiring, life, performance, period, talented

### Introduction

Angelou is an icon of Black culture and her work viewed as a mainstay of African-American culture and is often cited for its role in the forward progress of equal rights. Angelou was born April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. She received a scholarship to San Francisco's Labor School to study dance and drama and in 1954 she won a role in the opera *Porgy and Bess* which toured in some 20 countries. She worked closely with Martha Graham, the "mother of modern dance," and Alvin Ailey, an innovative African-American choreographer and activist whose masterpiece *Revelations* is considered the most well-known and most-performed dance performance. Her résumé broadened further still in 1957, with her first recorded album *Calypso Lady*. In 1958, Angelou moved to New York where she became an influential member of the Harlem Writers Guild, the oldest organization of African-American writers, activists and scholars, and performed in the landmark off-Broadway production of *The Blacks* by French playwright Jean Genet. She then moved to Cairo, Egypt as editor of *The Arab Observer*. She lived in Ghana during the decolonization period, teaching at the University of Ghana's School of Music and Drama, while concurrently working as an editor for *The African Review* and writing for *The Ghanaian Times*. During this time abroad, she studied and read intensively, becoming fluent in Spanish, Italian, French, Arabic and Fanti. It was also here that she was introduced to Malcom X. She returned to America in 1964 and helped him build his new Organization of African American Unity, until he was assassinated in 1965. Angelou next worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an African-American civil rights organization centered on King's ideologies, which played a large role in the Civil Rights movement. King's assassination on her birthday in 1968 greatly affected Angelou:



“King continues to have an impact on my life, as he does upon the lives of many people in the world. A dream – an idea – never dies. It might go in or out of fashion, but it remains. So his idea of fair play and justice still impacts upon me. He was a friend of mine, I worked with him... I am trying to be that fair person, that kind person, that generous, courageous person, that loving person that Martin Luther King Jr. was and encouraged us to become.”

Angelou was encouraged by friend and writer James Baldwin to write what became her best-known work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1969 and making Angelou known internationally. Her published fiction, nonfiction and poetry include over 30 bestselling works. She went on to write the script and compose the score for the film *Georgia*, the first African-American woman to write a script that was filmed. *Georgia* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

The list of her accomplishments is extensive and includes television and films-acting parts in Alex Haley's *Roots* in 1977 and John Singleton's *Poetic Justice* in 1993. She directed *Down in the Delta* in 1996-her first feature film-and in 2008 composed poetry and narrated the acclaimed documentary *The Black Candle*. Angelou was awarded the Presidential Medal of Arts in 2000 and the Lincoln Medal in 2008. She has received three Grammy Awards and some 50 honorary degrees. In 1993, she read her poem *On the Pulse of the Morning* at President Bill Clinton's inauguration, at his request. This was broadcast internationally and made her the first poet to present a poem at a presidential inauguration since 1961, when Robert Frost recited his work at John F. Kennedy's inauguration.

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” – Maya Angelou.

From her outstanding achievements in the arts and considerable contribution to the advancement of African-Americans, Maya Angelou has touched those that have come to know her and the inspiring spirit that pervades her creative works.

### **Issues in African American Literature**

African American literature is famous black authors known for many talented writers such as Toni Morrison, Ernest J. Gaines, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Walker Mosley, and they are ranked along with the top writers in the United States. Some of the themes and issues explored in African- American literature are the depiction of experiences of marginalized women. They also point to the role of African-American women within the larger American society, culture, racism, slavery, and inequality.

### **Maya Angelou and Her Works**

Maya Angelou was born on April 14, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, growing up in rural Stamps, Arkansas, with her brother, Bailey. She lived with her religious grandmother, who owned a General Store. Angelou has been an inexhaustible author for decades. She began her literary career as a poet, she is well known for her five autobiographical works, which depicts sequential periods of her life. The life experiences of the richly talented Maya Angelou are the cornerstone of her stories. Her stories trace the foundations of her identity as a twentieth-century Black American woman.

### **Gather Together in My Name**

Angelou's second autobiographical novel, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) covers the period immediately after the birth of her son, Guy and depicts her heroic struggle to care for



him as a single parent. She makes a great deal to falsify the oppressive notion of motherhood for working- class women. After the success of *Why The Caged Bird Sings* Angelou takes three-and-a-half years to write *Gather Together in My Name*. This book deals with her travel experiences from San Francisco to San Diego to Stamps back to San Francisco to Stockton and finally to Oakland, all in a brief time-span: An apt title for the book could be "Travel with Maya". Further, because of her displacement Angelou struggles with feelings of disappointment, guilt, and anger over the variance between the democratic ideology of American culture and her reality as an African American. Her illustrations of self, family, and community displacement thus provide the author the necessary latitude with which to explore the differences of her condition as well as her emotional reactions to those differences. In her search to identify her autobiographical self, Angelou is unmistakable, forced to consider the implication of her racial heritage. Angelou's dual position as a woman and as an African American ultimately strengthens her development of self. Maya Angelou's writings, like the individual that she is, are unique, yet they additionally reflect attributes common to African American autobiographical writings.

### **'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings'**

'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' portrays clearly the helplessness of the author as a young child. The novel begins with the children Maya and Bailey in a state of helplessness, sent by the parents all alone in the train to live with their grandmother, Momma. At a very tender age, when they do not understand racism, discrimination and exploitation, they experience such evils that existed so strongly in the society they lived. The novel also portrays the vulnerable state of the black workers, who were exploited in all respects, made to work like animals and paid poor wages by their masters. In spite of their hard work, they did not earn enough money to provide good food and shelter for their family. They were treated worse than animals just because of the color of their skin. This helpless and pathetic condition of the blacks provided their masters the chance to exploit them to the maximum. They considered it their fate and willingly allowed themselves to be exploited by their masters.

### **The Heart of a Woman**

*The Heart of a Woman*, the author describes her life as an adult, fighting all odds to bring up her son in the society. Her upliftment in life as a singer, editor and writer and the status she receives in the society after all her struggles, is brought out in the novel. This novel begins with the hope of bringing up her son in a respectable manner in the society. He was her only source of comfort and a ray of hope in life. She was ready to undergo any hardship for the sake of her son. She was willing to do odd jobs in order to provide a decent life for her son. All her struggles and tribulations that she faced in her career were acceptable to her in order to provide a comfortable life for Guy, her son. While singing in the night club about the freedom of the blacks, she was abused and humiliated by the whites. Though the blacks suffered extreme humiliation, disgrace and discrimination, they were not allowed to voice out their sufferings. Maya Angelou always had a love for books right from her childhood. She experienced a joy and a feeling of freedom when she started focusing towards the art of writing. This profession proved a solace for her, she was able to explore many thoughts and ideas through her writings, the ones she could not express verbally. She felt excited to read out her first one act play. The world of writing helped her to voice out her inner thought that she had suppressed so far in life. Then she focuses her life towards the world of her writings.



Maya Angelou sets different positions up to make due in the unforgiving climate of metropolitan life. Maya, both as a mother and a labourer, can't adapt to the troubles of city life. Her sibling Bailey acts as the hero and the book closes with restoring her blamelessness. She does a lot to disprove the restrictive view of parenting held by women employees. *Gather Together in My Name* took three and a half years to develop following the triumph of *Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The author also suffers from sensations of frustration, remorse, and resentment due to the disparity between the liberal notion of American society and her existence as an African-American as a result of her relocation (Sari, 2017).

### Conclusion

Angelou's depictions of oneself, household, and societal upheaval thus give her the space she needs to analyse the disparities in her situation, along with her emotional responses to them. Angelou is unambiguous in her journey for her autobiographical narrative, driven to examine the implications of her genetic background. She has opened new vistas of dark female concealment through her personal history. She is known for her series of six personal volumes zeroing in on her youth and early grown-up encounters. Angelou's dual identity as a woman and an African American helps her to build her own identity (Mohanlal et al., 2014). Maya Angelou's compositions, like her, are one-of-a-kind; however, they also share characteristics with other African American autobiographical works. Humans ought not to be divided and classed based on their ethnicity or gender because they are all supposed to be equal. Those that disagree with the situation formed an association to pool their resources and ideas. Many of them even rise to the top of organisations and organise protests to secure their privileges. Regrettably, there are still some African-American women who tolerate prejudice and class distinction.

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