

Tribhuvan University

Politics of Agency in Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman: An Autobiography*

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By

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Madan Raj Pant has completed his thesis entitled “Politics of Agency in Maya Angelou’s *The Heart of a Woman: An Autobiography*” under my supervision. He carried out his research work from March 2018 to March 2021. I hereby recommend this thesis be submitted for viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled Politics of Agency in Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman: An Autobiography* submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Madan Raj Pant has been approved by undersigned members of Research Committee.

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Abstract

This research aims to illustrate the politics of agency in Maya Angelou's The Heart of a Woman. Maya Angelou's autobiography explores how an African-American woman claims her agency amidst the white dominated American society. Maya Angelou faces discrimination in terms of class, culture, ethnicity and prejudice. Despite the discrimination, in terms of race, gender, class and cultural prejudices, Angelou asserts her voice against all sort of mistreatment towards her. This research is done under the theoretical light of Garnett's idea of "Agency and Inner Freedom", Gramsci's concept of "The Formation of Intellectual" and Kathryn Abram's notion of self-definition and self-direction. Angelou in her autobiography shows the pathetic condition of African American women in American society. She gives agency to present the sufferings of the African Americans in America especially black women who are trapped in the social and cultural barriers by white Americans. She has also challenged white's illiterate behavior and injustice in white dominated society is her politics of agency. It also studies the way they became successful to change themselves from victims of racism into self-dignified women capable of responding to injustice and exploitation. Maya Angelou uses writing as a vehicle to express African-American's voice against the prejudice of whites in America.

Key words: Autobiography, Agency, Inner freedom, Prejudice, self-direction, self-definition, intellectual.

This research paper claims how Maya Angelou challenges white people's injustices imposed upon blacks. The book opens with Angelou and Guy living in an experimental commune with white people, trying to participate in the new openness between Blacks and whites. Angelou is able to get along well with whites, but she

occasionally encounters prejudice, as when she needs help from white friends to rent a home in a separated neighborhood. Angelou continues her charge of white power structure and her protests against racial injustice.

This research paper explores how Maya Angelou challenges white people's injustices imposed upon black people. Autobiographical writings are good source of agency for marginalized people to challenge all injustices prevalent in society and claim for their identity. Through autobiographical writing, Angelou describes the discriminations existed in white dominated society and resist them to transform herself from the victim of racism to an independent woman. Her autobiography leads not only Maya Angelou but also all African-American women to show the path of freedom. Her autobiography proves that autobiographical writing can be a good source of agency for powerless people to dismantle the discriminations and injustices.

The African-American women's hardship in the white dominated American society is the central contention of the text. *The Heart of a Woman* recounts events in Angelou's life between 1957 and 1962 and follows her travels to California, New York City, Cairo, and Ghana as she grew up her teenage son, becomes a published author, becomes active in the civil rights movement. Maya Angelou presents a story of her struggle throughout of her life by presenting the cruelty of white Americans towards African-Americans. She becomes successful to take all African-American together for protesting against white domination. In this autobiographical novel *The Heart of a Woman*, she narrates her life struggles to search a room for rent, provide education to her son, to search job, fight against injustice and to challenge discrimination faced by her.

Angelou remains stable to her aim and ultimately achieves success to stand out as an independent woman. She presents herself as an active person who is free

from internal and external fear to dis-mental white domination. She succeeds to raise African-American's experiences and issues in America by writing whatever she faces throughout her life.

The dissatisfaction and alienation appear in the mind of the Angelou when she faces difficulty to get the job though she is qualified. Being black, her son, Guy also gets misbehaved in school during his teenage. Angelou is an ambitious person, especially during this season of her life. With her son as a teenager, she readily embraces the challenge of providing a stable and advantageous life for him while simultaneously pursuing her own dreams. She does not allow challenge to discourage her but uses these momentary obstacles as opportunities to grow on a personal level. While reading this autobiography *The Heart of a Woman* I was puzzled with the question like what difficulties Angelou faces during the settlement in the white dominated society. How Angelou became able to transform herself from victim of racism to a self-dignified woman?

Maya Angelou faces difficulties like searching room, job, and misbehavior from school administrative officer where her son, Guy studies. She faces such hardships and difficulties during the settlement in white dominated society in America. She became self- dignified woman by engaging in civil rights movement, publishing books and raising her voice against race discrimination in front of white dominated society.

This autobiographical text works as a source of agency not only for Maya Angelou but also for all African-American women. Critics have interpreted and looked at this autobiography from different perspectives. Neubauer opines that Maya and her son's struggle in white racist society shows how black people were compelled to live a painful life in America. In spite of various obstacles Maya Angelou remains

unstoppable to lead African-Americans to the path of freedom. Angelou's son Guy faces problems during his young age. Neubauer claims:

Angelou includes numerous anecdotes from Guy's youth problems she has also faced. These compelling accounts suggest the securing pattern of displacement and rejection in the relationship between mother and child. [...] Guy expect his mother to offer him constant attention and affection as well as the basic requirements of food and shelter. (124)

Different stories presented by Maya Angelou mirrors the problems faced by her and her son, Guy. She is displaced time and again from one place to another but she maintains strong bond with her son. Angelou shows that pathetic conditions can be overcome if one sticks to her goal in life.

Similarly, David Miller focuses on the idea that Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman* is full of insight and humor. She is able to present her painful experiences in a humorous way. Despite the tough situations for her to rear up her son she never loses a hope to educate her son. Miller comments as;

The Heart of a Woman can be mined for its riches instruction, insight, humor, wry wit lore, and fine writing. From this casebook on successful single parenting, we can see the perils a single mother in this case a black one, faces in bringing up a black male child in our society, where so many things seems bent on preventing him from reaching adulthood. Beyond the brute struggle to provide, there must be the constant watchfulness to insure that the child is not physically maimed or spiritually stunted. Then there is the danger of bringing up a male child by a lone woman, walking the fine line between sensuality and sexuality, the danger of distorting his sexuality. (48)

It is difficult to grow up male child for the women in the white dominated society. But Maya Angelou challenges white norms and values to achieve equality and freedom in white racist society. She chooses writing as her main weapon to uncover discriminations and challenge them. Guy going to university for his further study shows their dedication and commitment to become independent in America.

Miller opines that Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman* is an anthology of black woman's experiences. Angelou uses these experiences to take American woman together to revolt against racism. And Angelou as courageous woman who is ready to revolt against discrimination at any time. He describes Angelou as:

The Heart of Woman, What she keeps constant throughout the book is that it is the account of black W-O-M-A-N life. Her experiences with woman her love and respect for them and theirs for her, her niceness and delicacy in dealing with them, from her mother to her friends, even to mere acquaintances, these could provide a model of conduct for any woman to follow. (49)

Maya Angelou dismantles the white supremacy through her piece of writing. She does not become so much aggressive and presents things in a serious manner. Her technique of revealing the personal experiences of African-American woman works as a source of agency to become free from discriminations imposed against her in America.

Maya Angelou presents her bitter experiences in white racist society by employing some fictional devices such as dialogues, character development and unified themes. She is the first black autobiographer to present a talk about African-American womanhood. She challenges domination through her powerful writing. Cud Joe takes her writing as "a powerful, authentic signification of African-American womanhood in her quest for understanding and love rather than for bitterness and

despair" (46). Angelou is fearless to talk about African American women suffering in America by expressing her life story. She uncovers the experiences of African-American woman to challenge discriminations faced by them. She goes against racism, class discrimination and gender discrimination through her autobiographical writing. Her autobiography reflects not only her personal history but the collective history of African-Americans. Her autobiographical fiction explores the white dominations imposed upon blacks and gives her strength to challenge them as well.

All these reviewers have explored that Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman* is a book of family struggle, racial discrimination and woman empowerment in white dominated society. Most of the scholars argue that this novel visualizes the African-American's struggle in America during civil right movement. However, this research paper tries to show the politics of agency through Angelou's will to act independently. Her meticulous narrations of her personal experiences of ill-treated behavior of whites in public through this autobiography are her deliberate search for agency. Her will to act independently helps her to construct her own identity. Maya Angelou's agency operates through her writing to challenge white people's domination and assert distinct black experience of all the African-Americans.

This research is based on primary and secondary resources as well as material available in the library, journals and internet websites. This paper has taken theoretical insights from various theorists like Michael Garnett's *Agency and Inner Freedom*, Kathryn Abram's *From Autonomy to agency: Feminism Perspectives on Self Direction* and Antonio Gramsci's concept of *The Formation of Intellectual*.

Maya Angelou makes her stronger by developing self-confidence. She tries her best to challenge the discriminations and tortures faced by her. Her purpose in life is not just to make herself free from white patriarchal society but she also wants to

lead all black women to the path of freedom. For this Angelou chooses autobiographical writing as her main source of agency. Kathryn Abrams argues

Agency manifests itself in various terms of self-definition and self-direction.

Self-definition may be described as determining how one conceives of

One in terms of the goals one wants to achieve and the kind of person, with

particular values and attributes, one considers oneself to be. Agency as self-

direction is the direction of one's own course, including the identification of

particular goals and the implementation of particular projects and life plans.

(811)

Angelou raises voice against racial discrimination by involving herself in civil rights movement. Being a single mother, she proves herself strong and superior woman by rearing her son, Guy. She became a source of agency to all African-American people to show the path of freedom. Maya no longer feels the need to accept whatever whites say. She mentions:

I disagreed. Black people could never be like whites. We were different; more respectful, more merciful, and more spiritual. Whites irresponsibly sent their own aged parents to institutions to be cared for by strangers and to die alone.

We generously kept old aunts and uncles, grandparents and great grandparents at home, feeble but needed, senile but accepted as natural parts of natural families. (218)

Maya's counter argument to one of the white man's arguments is to show that African-Americans are more civilized, cultured, sociable, and determined than white people. Maya's protest gains enough strength to disrupt the white's control over black people. She challenges white supremacy with pride. Maya Angelou believes in her potential

and commitment to take African-Americans' issues into discussion lead the social behavior.

Maya Angelou is able to oppose and take a stand against whatever white people say about African-American to dominate, to torture and to exploit them. She does not want to take her as inferior being in the society. Whenever she finds herself humiliated by white racists, she takes an action and opposes the discriminations independently. Angelou's will to act independently through her agency is discussed in Diana Coole's article. She argues that, "[a]gency is a necessary ingredient of politics, while eliminating the Cartesian presupposing that have, for example, rendered the agency structure debate irresolvable and supported a subjectivist account of agents that is no longer tenable" (136). Angelou resists white supremacy and proves African-American as more capable than white people. She presents different dialogues in her autobiography to breakdown white people's notion on the life and living of black people. She mentions:

Our mercy was well known. During the thirties depression white hobos left freight trains and looked for black neighborhoods. They would appear hungry at the homes of the last hired and the first fired and, were never turned away. The migrants were given cold biscuits, leftover bins, grits and whatever black folks could spare. For centuries we tended, and nursed, often at our breasts, the children of people who despised us. We had cooked the food of a nation of racists, and despite the many opportunities, there were few stories of black servants poisoning white families. If that didn't show mercy, then I misunderstood the word. (218)

Maya Angelou takes a historical evidence of "The Great Depression" to prove African-Americans as more tolerant, helpful, kind hearted and hardworking than the

whites. During the depression white people appeared hungry at their homes and looked for the back neighborhoods. But African-American did not lose the hope and struggled hard to face the situations. This incident proves that African-Americans are courageous where as white racists are coward. Maya's example proves that white people can never face the tough situation as backs do. With the help of this evidence she argues that there is no right to white people to dominate African-Americans and take themselves superior to the black people.

The submissive nature of Maya Angelou is slowly and gradually transforming into the revolting voice. In the early days of her life she does not respond to the discriminations openly but along with time she develops her self-confidence to go against injustices to make African-Americans free from social, cultural and political barriers set by white people to dominate them. She works for the white people to afford her basic needs. During her stay with white people she learns their attitude towards African-Americans and the language they use to address them. She learns the language of the white people and she is able to understand the vulgar language used by white man, Billy Holiday. She finds her experiences similar to low class people. Angelou argues that:

Experience with street people, hustlers gamblers and petty criminals had exposed me to cursing. Years in night-club dressing room, in cabarets and Juke joints had taught me every combination of profanity or so I thought Billie Holiday's language was mixture of mockery and vulgarity that caught me without warning. (6)

White people use derogatory language to address African-Americans. Maya Angelou takes note of it and puts challenge to the system. Billie Holliday's language is the master's language which is vulgar in nature. Such a language from Holliday terrifies

Angelou so she goes against it. According to Maya Angelou white people dominate African- American through language and political power. Angelou's autobiography keeps record of these discriminations and unites African-Americans to revolt against all sorts of the discriminations.

In addition to this, Maya Angelou gets humiliated by Wilkie, a white lady in her neighborhood. Wilkie shows the sense of domination of whites over the African-Americans. Angelou quotes Wilkie's comments on her desire to be a singer. When Angelou tells Wilkie that she wants to be a singer, Wilkie questions as; 'you are a singer?' 'You a jazz singer too? You any good?' 'No really not, I don't have good Pitch. 'Do you want to be a great singer?' 'you want to compete with me?' " (7). When Wilkie asks Angelou if she is a good singer, Angelou does not reply anything because she is not a proud women. As she is not a proud woman she does not take herself as an expert singer. She compares herself with ordinary people. Angelou wants to be known as an ordinary being. Wilkie is proud of her voice because she is a white woman. Angelou rejects to compete with Wilkie because Angelou does not want to compete with the white ladies like Wilkie.

Maya Angelou is free from her inner fears and external fears to challenge discriminations faced by her. According to Garnett, "When we become free from internal and external fear we achieve deep agency. Deep agency is the most important weapon to dismantle dominants" (3). Angelou forgets that whites are superiors then blacks. She makes herself free from the boundary's set by the whites to exploit African-Americans. She tries her best to give freedom to the black community living in America. She directly challenges white supremacy. Angelou is time and again humiliated by different white people. She gets harsh treatment not only from Billie but also from the school administration. Without caring about the position and status

of administration officers, she challenges the administrative officers when he cheated her. When school administration circulates wrong information about Angelou's son, Guy, she rejects it. She mentions;

Guy brought home a message which infuriated me. My son was reasonably bright, but he had never been more than a competent student. The letter he brought home, however, stated that due to his wonderful grades, he had been advanced and would be attending another school at the end of the term.

The obvious lie insulted both my son and me, but I thought it wise to remove Guy from the school as soon as possible. I didn't want an already prejudiced faculty and administration to use him as their whipping boy. (23)

Angelou finds school administration biased she calls Whites as resists but does not reveal her anger in front of them because she wanted to stay disciplined. The school administration charges her son, Guy, for using foul language. The language of black's is taken as 'foul' which shows the interiorizing tendency of white's towards African-Americans. The school administrative officers say that the school administration does not allow Nigro boys to use foul language in front of the white girls. This suggests that the language used by African- American is not taken as the language which can be used in public place. This shows lack of freedom for blacks even to use their own language in public places.

Maya Angelou does not lose her self-confidence and will to act independently even if she faces lots of challenges throughout her life. She wants to make black people united to challenge the injustices faced by them. She finds herself insecure in white dominated society. After the insult from school administrative officer who is white, she plans to move in the area where black skin is not regarded as inferior. She mentions:

I began searching for another school and another house. We needed an area where black skin was not regarded as one of nature's more unsightly mistakes. The Westlake district was ideal. Mexican, black American, Asian and white families lived side by side in old rambling houses. Neighbors spoke to each other as they mowed their lawns or shopped in the long-established local grocery stores. (23)

Leaving the school where her son is insulted shows Maya's resistance against the discriminatory behavior of whites. It is her agency which keeps her unstoppable desire to fight against white cruelty towards black. She uses her agency to dismantle racism prevalent in America. She unites black people and makes them conscious about the exploitation faced by them. She became able to show white cruelty the blacks are undergoing through in America through her writing.

Maya Angelou brings transformation in American society through her constant struggle and selfless will to act independently. In Gramscian term she is an 'Intellectual'. According to Gramsci, "Learned people are not intellectuals. Intellectuals are those who challenges discrimination and bring social transformation" (49). Angelou joins different philosophers, writers, politicians to bring black people's issues in the mainstream. She becomes successful to lead all black people to the path of freedom. By the end of her autobiographical writing, the voice of a confused child is replaced by an experienced and an understandable woman. By rejecting the displacement and sufferings she transforms herself into a dignified woman. Maya Angelou tries to comprehend her body, her sexuality and became successful to educate her son. A black boy getting university degree shows a kind of social transformation regarding the status of African Americans in America. Angelou's son achieves university degree and makes her mother as well as all the African-

Americans proud and happy. Angelou argues that “At last, Guy came loping across the campus, his cast helmet looking almost white under the noonday sun. I forced myself to remain seated. He entered my tiny office, taking up its spare room. His complexion looked healthy, and his eyes were free of worry” (343).

An African-American getting university degree and being free from all kinds of worries is a sign of equality among blacks and whites in America. Maya Angelou’s struggles to get her identity as a self-dignified woman is substantiated through her writing and her son’s graduation. She regularly involves in political activities to make achieve her goal. She helps to raise consciousness among African-Americans for their right through her autobiographical writing. She uses writing as a source of her agency to bring equality between blacks and whites in America.

When people are self-determined and they have strong will to act they can easily dismantle the inequality in the society. In this line, Bell Hooks argues that, “[I]ndividual commitment when coupled with engagement is collective discussion, provides a critical feedback which strengthens our efforts to change and make ourselves a new” (35). Maya gets her “new self” through her activism. Maya Angelou unites all African- Americans to challenge racism in America. She goes to live with black community where she could talk about black issues and raise consciousness among them. She mentions:

I rented the second floor of a two-story Victorian, and when Guy saw the black children playing on our new street, he was giddy with excitement. His reaction made me see how much he had missed the close contact with black people. 'Boy!' He jumped and wriggled. 'Boy! Now, I'm going to make some friends!'.
(23)

Maya Angelou goes to the black community where her son gets an opportunity to play and enjoy with black children. In addition to this, she raises consciousness among blacks regarding their rights without any fear. Angelou is a hard working person whose patience, courage and silence give the survival and success to uplift the predicament of African- Americans. Maya breaks the race barrier by becoming the first artist and actor in New-York.

African -Americans are dominated by white racist because of the color of their skin. Whites believe that people with black skin are inferior, less civilized and less rational than them. In this reference, Frantz Fanon in his essay, "The Fact of Blackness" focuses on the ideas that black people in America are dominated by whites just because of their skin color. Frantz Fanon argues that, "[m]ask, skin and veil emphasizes how the historically determined surfaces of race, gender and culture objectify the colorized as well as how the colorize may counter and overcome these superficial identities imposed upon them by colorization" (15). It was not possible for African-American women to become singer and artist in some cities of America like San-Francisco and New-York. But Maya Angelou gets success to be an artist in New York. Maya Angelou secures her job and continuous her journey of resistance. Before Maya Angelou, it was impossible to African- American to work as an artist in America.

Maya knows that it is impossible for African-Americans to be an artist and actors in America but she works hard to achieve her goal. She continuously struggles for a job as a secretary like white of New-York but she repeatedly fails and gets frustrated for attempting several job interviews. Angelou writes, "I could get a job singing, but I didn't have an agent [...] I knew one white New York club owner who had been a loyal friend to me, but with my recently acquired new level of balk dignity

I refused go pleading to him for work” (53). Maya decides that the rejections comes and goes and they do not have to do anything with her race. Though her personal identity and her racial identity are not separated by whites, she wants to create her unique personal identity. After the continuous struggle for job she becomes successful to be an artist and her position challenges the racism. Becoming an artist is not only a victory for civil rights but also a personal victory for Maya's sense of self. The active resistance and outright protest, that is Maya's persisting and breaking the color line in the field of art and films.

White people do not believe in the potentiality of African-Americans. They always dominate African-Americans. Black feminist and critics of post colonialism have made mere investigation of racism at the heart of white feminism. Bell Hooks argues:

All too frequently in the women’s movements it was assumed one could be free of sexist thinking by simply adopting the feminist rhetoric; it was further assumed that identifying oneself as oppressed freed one from being an oppressor. To a great extent such thinking prevented white feminists from understanding and overcoming their own sexist-racist attitude towards black women. They could pay lip service to the idea of sisterhood and solidarity between women but at the same time they dismiss black women. (8-9)

White feminist do not accept that there is power relationship between white feminist and black feminist. The central point of western feminism is highly problematic for black feminism. White woman in America are dominated by white males only but African American woman like Maya Angelou are dominated by multiple forces including men, class, cast and race. Black women become victim of sexism and they face the presence of common forces of nature that assault and confuse all children.

Maya grows up more quickly than other children around her. Maya becomes formidable character who breaks down the discrimination even in her tender years. Maya's discussion of the "common forces of nature" foreshadows the way her journey of survival has yet to meet the obstacles of adolescence, sexuality, and teenage pregnancy. These obstacles are faced by most of African-American children, but black females intensify an already difficult situation. Angelou claims:

As the meeting was coming to end, I remembered a piece of advice Vus had given a few young African freedom fighters: Never allow yourself to be cut off from the people. Predators use the separation tactic with great success. If you are going to do something radical go to the masses. Let them know who you are. That is your only hope for protection. (188)

Maya Angelou, in her autobiography, presents the discriminations and insecurities faced by African- American woman in America. They face as well as challenge the discrimination with the help of their will to act independently without being tired. Due to the hard work and dedication Maya Angelou becomes successful to transform all African- American women from victim of racism, sexism and casteism to self-independent women capable of responding to prejudices prevalent in American society.

To change African-American victim of racism to self-dignified women, Maya Angelou joins different academic scholars and political leaders where she could get the opportunities in order to raise African-American issue. She joined the Harlem Writers Guild in the late 1950s where she accompanied a number of African-American authors including her friend James Baldwin. She also listens to the speech of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for the first time in 1960s and she was inspired to join

Civil Rights Movement. The autobiography ends with Maya as a self-dignified woman who has a son with university degree.

The Heart of a Woman presents themes that are common in autobiography by black American women. The writer introduces a unique point of view in American autobiography by revealing her life story through a narrator who is at some points a child and other points a mother. Maya Angelou, in her narrative makes the use of direct speech to give much priority on her own voice. The tone and style of her narrative are simple. She narrates her life experiences in a familiar language. Maya Angelou wants all African -American to understand their marginalized position and she encourages them to revolt against white domination. Angelou's mission is not only to make free from exploitation but also wants to take all African American to the path of freedom. This is the reason why she uses familiar language. Maya Angelou expresses the suffering of African-Americans through songs, short sketches, short stories and finally through autobiography. Maya Angelou's illustrates:

I began to write. At first I limited myself to short sketches then to song lyrics, and then I dared short stories. When I met John Killens he had just come to Hollywood to write the screenplay for his novel *Youngblood*, and he agreed to read some of what he called my work in progress [...] John said, 'Most of your work needs polishing. In fact, most of everybody's work could stand rewriting. But you have undeniable talent.' He added, 'You ought to come to New-York. You need to be in the Harlem Writers Guild.' The Invitation was oblique but definitely alluring. (25-26)

Maya Angelou chooses different means like sketches, songs and short stories to reflect African- Americans suffering in America. Autobiographical writing becomes the most important source for her agency to be expressed. Angelou becomes able to

make blacks familiar with the discrimination prevalent in America through her autobiography. Her writing is easy to understand so that most of the African-Americans understood the issue raised by her.

Angelou's writing is saga of black Africans in way how an African-American woman badly exploited in America. There lies a question not only in sexual exploitation rather racial and class operation. Black feminism helps to study the exploitation faced by African- American. Black feminism believes that sexism and racism are bound together and they are related to one another through intersectionality. Black feminism also encourages African Americans to fight against discriminations without any fear. Bell Hook's most famous book, *Ain't I a woman?: Black women and feminism* addresses the effects of the intersection of racism and sexism on black women, and how the convergence of sexism and racism have contributed to black women having the lowest status in American society.

In her autobiographical work *The Heart of a Woman*, Maya Angelou focuses on the instances where she is insulted by whites. She is repeatedly abused by the white masters even if she is serious towards her duty. Whites do not believe in her potentiality. She is taken as a prostitute by white man. Maya presents an evidence of an abuse from a white man when he mocks at Maya by denoting the physical appearance by black mother as an ape. Maya Angelou presents Teddy, a white man's words exactly as spoken by him- Angelou writes:

Are you a working girl or do you have a job? The softness of his voice belied the fact that he was asking if I was prostitute. I knew better than to act either ignorant or offended. I said my name was Maya. I was from California and I had a job in Manhattan, lived alone with my teenage son three blocks away.

(124-125)

The white men take African- American women as a prostitute. They do not believe that African- American can work in an office holding some respectable positions. They think that African-Americans are just to work as a labor and as a servant for whites. Whites create obstacle for them to work independently. The prologue of Maya's narrative shows how African-Americans are treated as a commodity by whites. The prologue shows the precarious position of an African- American girl.

The narrative highlights Maya's critical situation and her sense of alienation she is forced to create her counter image against white ladies. Maya does not satisfy to perform in the night clubs. It shows she dedicates herself to acting, writing, and political activism. She involves in these activities independently to speak up in favor of African-Americans which show her agency to be a singer, writer, civil right activist and artist. Angelou shows not only the victory of the civil right but also a personal victory of Maya's sense of self.

Angelou is special in the use of humor, self-mockery, linguistic sensibility and the skill of balancing the quest for human individuality. She is successful to show that racial, class and gender oppression affect the experiences of motherhood in a great extent. Maya Angelou challenges white racist thinking through her writing. She presents each and everything done by whites. Where Maya remains silent but later on she challenges the nature of whites through her writing. The white people see Maya as helpless, marginalized and characterless woman. She is violated by many of the whites because she does not have economic and political power. So most of the time Maya remains silent and waits for the right time to express her sufferings she mentions:

The few Black people who lived in Laurel Canyon, including Billy Eckstein, Billy Daniels, and Herd Geffries, were rich, famous and light skinned enough to

pass, at least for Portuguese. I, on the other hand, was a little-known night-club singer, who was said to have more determination than talent. I wanted desperately to live in the glamorous surroundings. I accepted its fictitious tales of amateurs being discovered at lunch counters, yet I did believe it was important to be in the right place at the right time, and no place seemed so right to me in 1958 as Laurel Canyon. (3-4)

Maya is traumatized because most of the time she is unable to resist white people's behavior. She is released from herself build cage only with the help of her will to act independently and her determination to fight against injustices. Angelou develops the sense of pride which contributes to the growing development of personality. She became free from all the guilts and moves ahead to the path of freedom. She educates her son and she herself becomes successful to work as an artist which was challenging for African-American women.

African- Americans were in a critical situation because of racism and gender discrimination in America. Whites take blacks as racially inferior, emotional and barbaric whereas whites are superior, rational and civilized. Even the naming pattern shows the discrimination among blacks and whites. According to Bernard:

[e]very year, slave owners responsible for managing estates were required by American law to submit, slaves and livestock on their prosperities. Whites were listed by firestone and surname; slaves were denoted by modifier referring to his, occupation or ethnicity; and stocks were merely enumerated. (329)

Our name is an essential part of our identity, changing names deliberately has some politics. People use different names for others to support them and to dominate them. Maya's name gets changed easily by a white woman from 'Marguerite' to 'Mary'

without her permission. This act of using different names for Maya is unkind to her.

Whites dominate African- Americans without caring about their feeling sad emotions.

In the narrative, there are other incidents of racism. Racism can be seen in the expression of one white man, Angelou presents an incident where the white man says, “Don’t let him go into show business. Black man in show business is bad news. When they can’t get as far as they deserve, they start taking it out on their women. What you say his name is?” (12). White men have developed negative attitude towards African-American’s potentiality. This act of negative attitude from whites is the act of racism which shows miss-representation of blacks. White people take African-American as a non-human who are not civilized as whites. Maya stands up for what she believes and does not allow anyone to take advantage of her. Maya Angelou demonstrates her resistance to white Americans. She does not follow white people and tries to challenge discriminations and injustices faced by African- American in America. She mentions, “I knew one white New York club owner who had been a loyal friend to me, but with my recently acquired new level of black dignity I refused to go pleading to him for work” (53). She does not want to tolerate mistreatment regarding any part of her identity and her inner dignity. Maya Angelou is sure about her persistence work to bring transformation in the life of African-Americans.

Angelou wants to prove the African- Americans are powerful and intelligent like whites. They are fighting for their rights even they are dominated, tortured, exploited and enslaved bitterly. She asserts the act of bravery of blacks. She mentions:

The preacher told us what we already knew about Martin Luther King, the dangers he had experienced and the triumphs he had won. The listeners didn’t move. There was a yawping expectancy under the stillness. He was here, our own man, black, intelligent and fearless. He was going to be born to us in

moment. He would stand up behind the pulpit, full grown, and justify the years of sacrifice and the days of humiliation. He was the best we had, the brightest and most beautiful. Maybe today would be the day we would find ourselves free. (68)

Maya Angelou encourages African-Americans to be an intelligent, civilized and dutiful. She wants to make them as equally as respectful as white. She does not let whites to take control over African- Americans. She knows that by uniting blacks she can resist against the racial discrimination. She ponders that white people are dominating African- American because they take them as inferior human being. Maya Angelou does not accept the idea that people's identity is determined by their skin color. She goes against the whites when they call African American savage. Angelou tries her best to know why whites called blacks 'savages'. She tries to know what it means by 'savage' for whites. She reveals the interiorizing trick of white by assigning blacks with 'savages'. She argues "First I had to understand the thinking of the savages. They were young black men, preying on other young black men. They had been informed, successfully; that they were worthless and everyone who looked like them was equally without worth" (101). It is clear that whites define blacks as savages in order to interiorize them. Whites considered blacks as 'worthless' suggest that the value of black is no more precious considered blacks as 'worthless' suggest that the value of black are equally worthless which is suggested by everyone who looked like them was equally without worth. The 'worthless' value of black suggests the interiorizing tendency of whites by calling these people black savage, whites want to prove their supremacy, value and worth.

Angelou focuses on the idea that in a chaotic situation African- American cannot remain silent. They cannot bear the domination, discrimination and torture

given by the whites. She keeps record of how the whites prey blacks with shotgun and dogs. She mentions "But we cannot relax, because for every fair -minded white American, there is a Bull Connor waiting with his shotgun and attack dogs" (117-18). It brings the reference of how blacks are killed by white American. Angelou's visualization of white American with 'shotgun' and 'dogs' suggest the ready position of whites for taking the lives of blacks. The pains and sufferings faced by African-Americans are unbearable. Angelou wants Black Nationalist to revolt against such racial discriminations. She mentions; "[b]lack nationalist spoke on street corners, demanding freedom now. Black Muslims changed. The white community with genocide and insisted on immediate and total segregation from the murdering blue-eyed devils" (118-19). The main aim of nationalist is to become free from white domination and cruelty. When the black revolution becomes strong the white Americans were anxious because of fear of lacking autocracy. The revolt does not take place an ordinary place it takes place in the 125 streets and Seventh Avenue which is taken as dangerous at normal times. African-Americans initiate their revolts from the very dangerous place.

Angelou starts collecting donation for helping the blacks who are victimized by whites. She asserts, "Donation of any amount was a direct blow against the citadel of oppression which held a helpless people enthralled" (123). Angelou asks for donation from those who like to help blacks. She considers donation of any amount as 'direct blow' against the white's oppression. Angelou raises questions and seeks for probable answers about the problem of oppression of blacks by whites. She asserts;

Why sixteen million Africans allowed three million whites to control them,
reminding Make that we black Americans was only a tenth of the United States

population, but we had stood up and fought back ever since we were brought here as slaves. (134).

Angelou reveals that sixteen million Africans are helpless before the white rule. The control of the whites over the blacks suggests that they are caught in the maze of white's conspiracy. It is also suggested that since blacks were brought as 'slaves' in the United States, they are obliged to stay silence. It is also noted that blacks are considered inferior to the white. Whites have constructed law in favor of them to rule over blacks and make them slave. She mentions, "We are not considered in the written laws dealing with fair play. We are not only brutalized and oppressed; de facto, we are ignored de jure" (138). African- Americans are ignored by the law so that they remain revolutionary throughout their life. The revolutionary mentality of the black people suggests that they want to dismantle the white autocracy. Angelou writes, "I would bring to him the vitality of jazz and the endurance of a people who has survived three hundred and fifty years of slavery. He would succeed in bringing the ignominious white rule in South Africa to an end" (156). The black activist Vus shares his experience what he has faced his entire life. He has spent his many years as a slave. It shows that African Americans want to end white rule. The African Americans who are survived despite of three hundred and fifty years of slavery want to free South Africa from the grip of whites which is suggested by bringing the ignominious white rule in South Africa to an end.

Angelou reveals the pains and suffering of African-American people by demonstrating the picture of South African who escapes from whites grip and keeps alive by eating worms in the desert. She mentions "I've met a South African. He escaped over the desert. He kept himself alive by eating worms. The whites sent him out to die but survived. He has come to the United States and he deserves our support"

(158). It suggests that the entire motif of whites is to kill blacks. The whites sent blacks out to die but the ability of blacks to survive without food and water shows their physical boldness. African-Americans revolt against discrimination, injustices and become stronger when Maya Angelou informs African -Americans about their rights. Angelou presents in the text that African- Americans become successful to raise their voice against white domination. Angelou gives an evidence of how she dares to speak against the rule of whites; "Don't dare touch me. Don't put your hands on me, you white bastard!" (199). this line shows the revolutionary nature of African-Americans against the domination and exploitation of whites. Blacks don't want to bear any torture from whites. They are ready to fight but they don't want to remain as a slave. Their defense against racial injustice drives them towards the demand for freedom. The strategy adopted by African- American to challenge discrimination and exploitation is that they separate themselves from whites and from their own community.

Excessive domination from the whites leads African-American to go against it without any caring about life and death at the end they raised their voice and go for political activism to maintain equality. Maya Angelou reveals that African-Americans are not savages but white people are savages in reality. Angelou writes, "Tell them, tell the savages of your country; that Mother Africa will no longer allow them to suck from her breast" (300). This expression shows that white people are more savage they torture, exploit and discriminate African-Americans. The anger of blacks becomes violent because of brutal activities of the whites. The blacks are ready to sacrifice their life rather than to get insulted by whites. Angelou writes; 'did he insult you? I mean us, the race?' 'Not directly. Like most white racists, he was paternalistic. I would have preferred he slap me than that he talk down upon me. Then I could retaliate in

kind' (302). This expression reveals the fact that African-Americans are no more ready to accept whatever whites do to them. The determination of African-American is not to be insulted by whites.

White people give physical as well as psychological torture to an African-American. Their torture for black people is unbearable. Angelou writes how white man took their names, language, power, wives, daughters and self-value, "In the United States white men, with the implement of slavery and racial oppression, had taken from African-American man their names, language, power, wives, daughters, innate senses of self-value their confidence" (314). It shows that the African-American's identity creates along with their name, language, power and family members in America. Towards the end of this autobiographical novel Angelou shows the victory of African-Americans over the whites in America. She shows the African-American people as intelligent ones. She mentions how the black pilots captains and other black people work together. She narrates:

In Ghana "Black pilots? Black captains? It was 1962 in our country, the cradle of democracy, whose anthem boasted 'the land of the free, the home of the brave', the only black men in our airports fueled planes, cleaned cabins, loaded food or were skycaps, racing the pavements for tips. (327-28)

At the end, Angelou's dream for the land of freedom and equality all African-American **get freedom**. It displays the victory of African-Americans. Togetherness of blacks made victory against whites. Angelou hopes that it will be easy for African-American man to interact with other African-American in Ghana. She also notes that her son will be able to overpower the racial discrimination. She mentions, "Guy would be able to weigh his intelligence and test his skills without being influenced by racial discrimination" (328). It suggests that Angelou's attempts become fruitful for

her son Guy. Not only that she remarks how the black man is considered as hero all over the world but hated and feared by whites in power. Angelou writes, "Kwame Nkrumah was the African hero. He had wedded Marxism to the innate African socialism, and was as loved by black people all over the world as he was hated and feared by whites in power" (330). It shows that black people can become hero all over the world. From the beginning to the end of the autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou shows the racial discrimination prevalent in America. In such way, this autobiography compels people to think about life, liberty, pursuit of freedom and equality based society.

To sum up. Maya Angelou, in her autobiographical text, *The Heart of a Woman* presents discriminations, tortures, injustices and exploitations faced by African American women in white racist society. With the help of her autobiographical writing, Angelou becomes successful to unearth color based injustices and enlightens African-Americans about white cruelty and injustices. Autobiographical writing is the main source of agency for Maya Angelou to dismantle racial discriminations. She uses her agency to create equality and lead African American to the path of freedom in America. In her autobiography, Angelou has mentioned her journey how she has succeeded to change herself from the victim of racism to a self-dignified woman. She became capable to respond prejudices prevalent in white dominated society. Angelou has willpower to act independently to challenge biases which she does through writing and directly involving Civil Rights Movement.

Angelou suffers throughout her life because of excessive domination, racism, sexism, and slavery system. In her autobiography, she describes her experiences of being single mother, slave and facing moral degradation and dehumanization. In spite of those bitter experiences, Maya Angelou remains stable to her aim and ultimately

stands out as an independent woman. She does not only lead herself to the path of freedom but also makes all African-American women free from injustices and slavery. She presents herself as an active person who is free from internal and external fear to dismantle the injustices and white supremacy.

Angelou expresses her bitter experiences to the mass through her autobiographical writing. She makes all African American aware about injustices and their right through her autobiographical writing. This unites all African-Americans to revolt against racism, sexism, dominations, injustices discriminations and slavery system. Maya's autobiography works as a source of agency not only for Maya Angelou but also for all African-Americans.

Angelou finds that there is lack of awareness among African-Americans about their rights which makes them suffer more. So, the objective of Angelou's autobiographical text is able to make all African-American's aware about their rights and unite them to revolt against white supremacy. The autobiography is concerned with physical and psychological suffering due to racial discrimination and injustices created by white racist society. The autobiography directly or indirectly deals with the power of African-American women to survive and shape their future despite hardship. Maya Angelou depends on her experiences to present discrimination and brutality imposed upon African-American women by whites in America. Angelou has self-determination as well as capacity to act independently to challenge discriminations faced by African-Americans. Her autobiographical writing becomes the main source of her agency. She makes the use of her agency to make doubly exploited African American women free from victim of racism and maintain their position as a dignified woman capable of responding to biases this is her politics of Agency.

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