Trauma- A Psychological and Physical impression on Individual: “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and Gather Together My Name”

P.Jayageetha*1, Dr.S.S. Jansirani*2.
* Research Scholar,
PG and Research Department of English,
Government Arts College, Trichy, Tamilnadu-22.

Abstract— The present paper deals with trauma as a psychological, physical and mental injury with a strong impression on the mind of an individual. The life of Maya Angelou begins with a childhood rape syndrome and moves on to various bitter experiences like economic instability, social insecurity, dislocation and racist segregation. Volumes of her transformation speak from trauma through displacement and suffering to freedom and liberation. It is same with most of African American suffered from various problems that traumatized people and their life. There are many questions to be answered by the people who involved themselves in racial discrimination, injustice, slavery and the white domination. Such domination provoked many black writers to search for answers. They try to fight against atrocities and suppressions made against people in the name of colour, race and gender.

Keywords — Racism, Classicism, Sexism, Trauma, Psychological and Individual.

I. INTRODUCTION

An African American suffered from many problems that traumatized their people, fellow being and their lives. Racial discrimination, injustice, suffering, slavery and the white dominion forced them to search answers to these problems, and improve themselves as American citizens. They took the defiance through non-violence to demonstrate that they have capacities and competences, and to prove that the color of the skin does not mean superiority or inferiority. The important subject that had a big impact on most black Americans at that period of time, if not all of them, which is trauma. Trauma theorists and narratives have emphasized the nature of trauma on the subject and self doubt that dominate survivors of traumatic events, consciousness that attend their efforts to recall their experiences in narrative form. It is a psychological, physical and mental damage which leaves on the person a deep and sometimes a permanent effect.

Trauma is a psychological, physical and mental damage with a permanent effect on the individual. The first two volumes I Know why the Caged Bird Sings” and Gather Together my Name have been analyzed with focus on displacement as the reason for sexual abuse and the traumatic suffering that follows. Trauma happens when the concerned person is exposed to a shocking experience that affects his psychological, mental, and spiritual state. The child trauma that occurs as the result of a sexual abuse is a very delicate one. A traumatized persons behavior start changing; start getting flashbacks of what happened to him/her, and having difficulty in sleeping having nightmares. In the case of Maya Angelou, she overcomes the trauma and faces the challenges. Trauma differs from one person to another, from case to another and from a circumstance to another as well. Thus, it has different types which vary depending on the situation or the event that causes the trauma.

Female struggle for liberation had also been achieved gradually, when the women fought with courage; and their pride played an important part in their novels, critically acclaimed on the subject matters of African-American autobiography. Dolly A McPherson remarks:

“Black writes have tried, by the use of autobiography and, a lesser degree, other literary modes, to examine to themselves and articulate their findings, not only in an effort to celebrate their unique experiences, but also to explain their situation to that group of the society, which could, if it chose, alter the conditions of the writers lives.”

Angelou, as a woman, demonstrated the formation of her own cultural identity throughout her narratives. Angelou presented herself as a role model for African-American women by reconstructing the Black woman’s image throughout her autobiographies, and has used her many roles, incarnations, and identities to connect the layers of oppression with her personal history. Angelou’s themes of the individual’s strength and ability to overcome appeared throughout Angelou’s autobiographies as well. The woman Angelou presented in her autobiographies, especially Caged Bird, influenced the woman Angelou became. According to Manora, three characters in Caged Bird, Angelou’s mother Vivian, her grandmother Annie Henderson, and Mrs. Flowers, collaborated to
form a triad which serves as the critical matrix in which the child is nurtured and sustained during her journey through Southern Black girl hood.

The book opens when three year old Maya and her elder brother are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother and ends when Maya becomes a mother at the age of seventeen. In the course of the Caged Bird, Maya transforms from the victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice. Angelou uses her autobiography to explore subjects such as racism, identity, rape and literacy. Maya, the central character has been called “a symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America. Angelou’s treatment of racism brings a thematic unity to the book and resistance to racism is the main theme that is dealt with in this paper. While selecting a title for the book, Angelou turned to Paul Laurence Dunbar, an African American poet whose works she had admired for years. The title of the book I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings comes from the third stanza of his poem Sympathy. The incidents encountered by the characters in this book are due to the overt racism of the white neighbours. The inhuman behavior of the whites is depicted when the Black people hear about the Ku Klux Klan raiders, the whites who terrorized the blacks and their allies, murdering, lynching, raping and beating intended to protect the rights and interests of the white Americans. Momma, Maya’s grandmother hides her son Willie in a potato bin all night while the white men scour the black section of Stamps for a scapegoat.

“His confidence that my uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan’s coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear”. (14)

Maya’s grandmother is another example of the evil of racism. One day three poor white children approached the store. The children mocked Momma by mimicking her gestures and Maya cried with impotent rage and thought of getting her uncle’s rifle to do harm to her. The title I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is apt as Maya Angelou compares herself and her entire race to the bird which is locked in a cage but does not sing. A bird sings sometimes to find solace to itself and this is what Maya Angelou has done to share her experience. Angelou in her autobiographical fiction expressed the various forms of resistance of the blacks against racism. Despite recognizing the personally empowering nature of these instances of resistance, Maya’s descriptions illustrate that such resistance serves to save the African - American community from drowning in the inevitable desperation.

“During the months she spent writing the book, practically withdrew from the world. She’d set the bar high. Her ambition was to write a book that would expose the Black experience and affirm the human spirit. She more than achieved her goal. She wrote a coming –of–age story that has become a modern classic.” - Marcia Ann Gillespie, 2008 (41)

The structure of the text, which resembles a series of short stories, is not chronological but rather thematic. Walker, in his 1993 article about Caged Bird, Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form, focuses on the book’s structure, and describes how it supports her presentation of racism. According to Walker, critics had neglected analyzing its structure, choosing to focus instead on its themes, which he feels neglects the political nature of the book. He states;

“One serves Angelou and Caged Bird better by emphasizing how form and political content work together”. (42)

Angelou structures her book so that it presents a series of lessons about how to resist racism and oppression. The progression Maya goes through thematically unifies the book, something that stands in contrast, arranges, and organizes her vignettes often undermined the chronology of her childhood by juxtaposing the events of one chapter with the events of preceding and following ones so that they too comment on each other. To sum up, the title I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is apt as Maya Angelou compares herself and her entire race to the bird which is locked in a cage but does not sing. A bird sings sometimes to find solace to itself and this is what Maya Angelou has done to share her experience. Angelou in her autobiographical fiction expressed the various forms of resistance of the blacks against racism. Despite recognizing the personally empowering nature of these instances of resistance, Maya’s descriptions illustrate that such resistance serves to save the African - American community from drowning in the desperation and despair that envelopes them. The work serves valuable resource from the psychological and human development perspectives also. I know Why the Caged Bird Sings covers tough issue such as the rape and racism, sexual development and gender issues, identity, and the impact between family members, and the main characters in the play.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a versatile text which can be utilized in a variety of class- room settings. If you are considering the text for use in literature or English classes, it gives a scope for exploring genre. The work is often identified by critics as autobiography or autobiographical fiction, with many scholars and critics proposing that there is a distinction between the two. Generally, Semi autobiographical fiction covers the “based on the true story” but the author wishes to discuss certain critical points of merits with some aesthetic characters. However, Angelou works gives many answers to the questions posed by the critics. In order to answer these questions, it will be helpful to break the book into its formal elements—structure, plot, narration and voice, characters, setting, etc.—and analyze them.

Alternatively, there are certain issues to address the historical and cultural context of the work by studying its role as a social device or impetus for cultural change. If the researcher takes this approach, he may wish to look at the book within a tradition of American protest literature. This approach might be adopted in literature classes, but would also be a fitting and dynamic approach for history students, or those studying the American South in particular. The works addresses many contemporary issues like racism and identity. There are certain scenes like Joe Louis fight and the scene where readers find Uncle Willie hiding in a potato bin. This text can also be studied under sociological standpoint might wish to consider how the various groups of people in the story relate to and identify with one another, or how they fail to do so. The questions to which the critic or react to;
“How do the different races interact?
Does Angelou want us to form judgments about races as single entities?
Or is there something else that she is getting at?
How do the characters of varying generations interact?
Finally, what do we learn about social class?”

In response to these questions, all the suitable replies can be found in the situations and the characters which the reader comes across while reading the text. All of them are from the text “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” and they are flat and round characters. The text is also a valuable resource for those studying psychology and human development. “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” covers tough issues such as the effects of rape and the trauma resulting from abuse; sexual development and gender issues; identity; and the impact of relationships between family members, friends, teachers, and students.

Maya shields herself against the confusion of St. Louis by reading fairy-tales and telling herself that she does not intend on staying there anyway. Vivian works in a gambling parlour at night. Maya pities Mr. Freeman because he spends his days at home waiting for Vivian to return. Maya begins sleeping at night with Vivian and Mr. Freeman because she suffers from nightmares.

One morning after Vivian has left the bed and the house, Mr. Freeman sexually molests Maya. He does not rape her but rather masturbates on the bed while holding her close to him. Afterward, he threatens to kill Bailey if Maya ever tells anyone, but Maya, who does not understand what, has happened and who actually enjoyed being held by someone, cannot understand what caused such a threat. For weeks, Mr. Freeman ignores her, and then molests her again. Again, he ignores her for weeks. Maya feels rejected and hurt, but she loses herself in other things, such as books. She wishes she were a boy because the heroes in all her favorite books and stories are male. Bailey welcomes the move to St. Louis and he makes friends, with whom he plays baseball. Maya, however, does not make any friends during this time. She and Bailey begin to grow apart, so she spends her Saturdays in the library reading fantastic adventures.

Late spring, after Vivian stays out all night one time, Mr. Freeman sends Maya to buy milk. When she returns from the errand, Mr. Freeman rapes her. He threatens to kill her if she screams, and he threatens to kill Bailey if she tells anyone. Afterward, Mr. Freeman sends her to the library, but Maya returns home because of the intense physical pain she feels between her legs. She hides her underwear under her mattress and goes to bed. Vivian thinks she might be coming down with the measles. Later that night, Maya hears Vivian argue with Mr. Freeman. In the morning, Vivian tells Maya that Mr. Freeman has moved out. When Bailey tries to change the linens, the bloodied panties Maya has hidden under the mattress fall out. Vivian takes Maya to the hospital. Bailey privately urges Maya to name the rapist, assuring her that he would not allow the culprit to kill him. Maya reveals Mr. Freeman’s name, the authorities promptly arrest him. Maya thinks of herself as a grown woman, remembering that her nurses told her that she has already experienced the worst that life has to offer.

Maya feels caught in a trap when the attorney asks her whether there were any sexual incidents with Mr. Freeman prior to the rape. She fears rejection from her family if she admits to the previous incidents, but she does not want to lie either. Ultimately, she lies to the court and Mr. Freeman receives a sentence of one year and one day in prison. Surprisingly, he is temporarily released after the hearing, and a white policeman visits later that night to tell Grandmother Baxter that Mr. Freeman has been beaten to death. Maya hears them quickly drop the subject and briefly discuss casual matters before the policeman leaves.

The family never speaks of the incident, and Maya convinces herself that Mr. Freeman was killed because she lied in order to condemn him. Thinking that she has sold herself to the Devil, Maya resolves to protect others by not speaking to anyone except Bailey. At first the family accepts her silence as fallout from the rape, but after some time, they feel offended and become angry and violent with her. Maya and Bailey return to Stamps, though Maya is not sure whether Momma has sent for them or whether her St. Louis family simply became unable to handle her silence. Bailey misses Vivian, but Maya finds herself relieved to return to the barren world of Stamps. Bailey exaggerates the wonders of the big city to the curious residents, developing his sarcastic tone, but no one notices his insults. He remains kind only to Maya. He understands Bailey’s frustration, and he understands her silence.

II. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, Maya almost begins to appreciate and grow within her surroundings in St. Louis, her guilt-ridden response to Mr. Freeman’s sexual molestation reveals that she has not adjusted well to her parental abandonment and life of isolation. Mr. Freeman takes advantage of Maya because she has never experienced much physical contact or affection, and she confuses Mr. Freeman’s exploitative behavior with the physical attention she has yet to receive as a child. Maya’s need for physical contact confuses the incident in her mind so much that she interprets Mr. Freeman’s threat to kill Bailey as an indication that she has done something wrong, although she cannot say what.

Mr. Freeman also takes advantage of Maya’s caring personality, especially her tendency to care for people in similar positions of neglect and pain. Perhaps trying to foreshadow the rape, Maya shows that she spent much time observing Mr. Freeman as he pathetically awaited Vivian’s return in the evenings. Maya notes that Mr. Freeman has breasts like deflated female breasts and how she feels sorry for him. After the two separate incidences of sexual molestation, Mr. Freeman ignores Maya for weeks, augmenting her feelings of rejection and guilt.
REFERENCES


