



## **A SUBALTERN READING ON THE HEART OF A WOMAN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Heart of a Women is the fourth volume of Maya Angelou's continuing autobiography out of seven volumes. Maya Angelou narrated from the point of view of a woman who tells more about the same story that she told in her previous volumes. This volume opens by some of detailed notes of historical reflections intended to locate Maya Angelou's time and place, where the African-Americans were treated as Subalterns, because being born Black is itself a liability in a world ruled by White criterions of beauty which imprisons the child Maya a priori in the cage of ugliness. This paper throws lights on the Subalterns and their pain and struggles in the voice of Maya Angelou. This volume traces Maya's spiritual, psychological and political odyssey as she emerges from a disturbing and oppressive young years to become a prominent figure in contemporary American literature. She has clearly portrayed the hardships associated with lower-class African American life.*

**Key Words:** Racism, Oppression, Struggle, Hardship, Subaltern.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The voice of African American community and the African American Women is the main concern in the serial autobiographies of Maya Angelou. Particularly in the fourth volume *The Heart of a Woman*, she records her marginalized experience and oppressed consciousness. This recording leads her to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity. Her autobiography acts as resistance to those who denied the possibility of full life to the people in America.

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The reader is thrown into the oppressed situation of African-Americans who were treated as subalterns especially women were suffered more as second class citizens. Through the autobiographical products of Maya, readers can felt a weird look on them through this private journey of Maya. Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist-Communist, used the term 'Subaltern' to refer to any person or group of inferior rank or position and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion. Here, Maya Angelou fits into Gramsci's definition. She belongs to the Black community and the struggle to get her identity and fights a lot to survive, because of Racism.

In the early life span of Maya Angelou, the South America was at the peak of facing the effects of Racism, "Racism was not only homicidal but it was also suicidal" (p.no: 245). So they were in the critical condition to prove the world that they are equal to the other people in the world, for that purpose they started to attract the world people to themselves by various ways, to prove their identity. In the beginning of this volume Maya remembers Althea Gibson, who has become the first black women's single champion of Tennis in America.

According to Gayathri Chakravarty Spivak, in her work "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Subaltern people can never express their ways of knowing (thought, reasoning, and language) and instead must conform expression of their non-Western knowledge of colonial life to Western ways of knowing the world. So through the journey of Maya, it is clearly depicted that it is too difficult to survive for Blacks (Subalterns) in a White land. They need proper guidance, good leadership, economical wealth etc., to raise their voice to gain what they need for their welfare.

In this volume Maya never drops a chance to prove herself as a powerful creation, even though she has observed existential problems from the modern American society. This phase begins with Maya move to New York without her son Guy, she earn money to get prevent from financial insecurity through working as a singer, dancer in the night clubs and dedicates herself in acting, writing poems, essays etc.,

Maya's son Guy was victimized for racial discrimination in the opening sequences of the book. During his school days he had been accused with using foul language in front of some girls on the school bus. So, Maya visited the school to discuss the problem, there she was confronted with racist attitude. The teachers gave a very negative picture of her son:

*"We do not allow Negro boys to use foul language in front of our girls."*  
(p.no: 22)



The dominant theme of this volume is motherhood, the complications of the theme, can be demonstrated by dividing into three different issues: Maya mothering Guy; Vivian mothering Maya; and Maya mothering herself. She improves in her ability to care for her son Guy and solicit his opinions, and also she worries about the well growing life of Guy. The best example is this volume is on fifth chapter, where Angelou's conflict with motherhood occurs in the episode involving the Brooklyn gang, the Savages. It is highlighted by the fact that when Guy gets in trouble with the gang Angelou is in Chicago on a singing engagement. John Killens, who is watching over him while she is away, phones from Brooklyn to inform her that "Maya?" John Killens' voice was a spike, pinning me in place. "There's been some trouble" (92). Maya worried a lot about her son Guy, when she comes to know about the dangerous gang, it shows her love towards her son Guy.

*"The boys are a gang called the Savages. They killed a boy last month, and as he lay in the funeral home, the Savages went in and stabbed the body thirty five times." (p.no: 96)*

From this and similar encounters with Guy, Angelou learns that the continual displacement of her own childhood is something she cannot prevent from recurring in her son's life. These examples tells the audience that Black children were not leading a safe and secured life in America, Angelou's main purpose for writing these volumes of autobiography is to emancipate for African-Americans. Because they were oppressed by the whites.

*"Whether we come from New York City or South or from the West Indies, the black people are equally oppressed." (p.no: 182)*

Near the end of this volume, Guy is seriously injured in a car accident. In a condensed, tormented autobiographical passage, Angelou gazes at the face of her unconscious son. She worried about him, and she got some money from her mother for the medical support of her son Guy.

Totally, this forth volume tells us that the blacks never be in a safe zone, especially young women and children. Therefore, Maya is seeking marriage as the answer to her own sense of dislocation and fully envisions a perfect future with various prospective husbands. For her security and to support her financially, Maya's only choice is - marriage. While in New York, she meets Vusumzi Make, a black South African freedom fighter, and imagines that he will provide her with the same domestic security she had hoped would develop his relationships with him: "Vus said we would marry in Oxford, such a pretty little town." (p. no: 164), but Maya's marriage life was not successful.



This volume provides Maya's journey towards political and her life struggle with Guy her son. She gives interest to take part with the political organizer Martin Luther King, Jr, her account of a visit with Martin, at SCLC office is just one of the major examples of this volume. They have formed many ideas to gain the freedom from racism, but the major problem for these leaders is economy. They need more money to look forward for the protest against racism. So, Maya joined with Martin, Malcom X, Elijah Muhammad, Kwame Nkrumah etc., to strengthen her arms against the racism and fascism.

*"Martin Luther King was sacred and fund-raising was my calling" (p.no: 121).*

Malcolm X talked in favour of the Blacks for their freedom, he said that the whites are behaving like devils. He woke up the Blacks for protest through his powerful words,

*"Every person under the sound of my voice is a soldier. You are either fighting for your freedom or betraying the fight for freedom or enlisted in the army to deny somebody else's freedom" (p.no: 179)*

To give more support on economical wealth, Maya and her crew, started to perform many events like singing songs, dramas and dancing in clubs. Her crew members asked Maya to write a play about Martin Luther King.

*"They wanted me to produce another revue. They wanted me to write a play about Martin Luther King and the struggle." (p.no: 106)*

But, unfortunately, in chapter Eleven, Maya narrates a tragic incident, a freedom fighter and a good supporter for blacks named as Lumumba was killed, this shown us the racism was at the peak condition. CAWAH has taken a vital role in protesting against the White domination.

*"We are members of CAWAH. Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage. We have learned that our brother, Lumumba, has been killed in the Congo." (p. no: 186)*

In the meantime, Maya searched many places to get a fine job, finally, she got a job as a journalist & reporter in *Arab Observer* magazine a Cairo-based news journal with an international scope by the help of her friend David. She believed that her job may helpful to her personal life and for to support for the protesting. Her son Guy was also finds a part-time job,



*“Guy had found a part-time job in a bakery nearby, and dawn found him showering and dressing,...” (p.no: 78)*

This volume, *The Heart of a Woman*, ends in a separation of Guy, who is a student at the University of Ghana, is moving to a dormitory. In last two paragraphs we find Angelou alone:

*I closed the door and held my breath. Waiting for the wave of emotion to surge over me, knock me down, take my breath away. Nothing happened. I didn't feel bereft or desolate I didn't feel lonely or abandoned.*

*I sat down, still waiting. The first thought that came to me, perfectly formed and promising, was “At last, I'll able to eat the whole breast of a roast chicken by myself. (p.no 336)*

Angelou sits and waiting for something horrible to happen to herself as she had earlier imagined Guy's being stolen or being hit by a bus. But she can manage to handle it herself alone, she proved herself as a courageous women.

Sandra O'Neale suggests that

*“The process of [Angelou's] autobiography is not a singular statement of individual egotism but an exultant explorative revelation that she is because her life is an inextricable part of the misunderstood reality of who Black people and Black women truly are.”*

Angelou has described the art of autobiography as a means for a writer to go back to the past and recover through imagination and invention what has been lost. She loved language for telling the truth to the whole world, so, Maya has selected the genre of autobiography and once again she go back to her past life and write about her society narrates her state of being oppressed to us.

The genre autobiography has become an inevitable form of literature in the modern context. It might have been a didactic one for many decades. It gradually gained some importance to represent sociological and psychological worldview. Maya select this genre and narrates the incident in a broad way to record her contemporary society and the subaltern's attitude towards struggle and quench for freedom. Maya's challenge of recovering the lost years, she succeed the challenge of the process of self-discovery and reconfirmed her commitment to life's struggle through this volume.

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