

## Identity & racism in Maya Angelou & Nissim Ezekiel

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### Abstract

The legacy and heritage of leading African-American poet Maya Angelou and Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel to the English literature is unquestionable as they have contributed a lot of literary works in the form of poems, critical essays and plays. Their works have problems of discriminations based on identity and race in their countries. They portray, reveal and expose the true image, impression of this discrimination, prejudice, unfairness and intolerance in their works. The subordination based on class, caste, gender, race, language and culture has become the unsolvable problems of the world. The subaltern theme has become so prominent in all walks of life of the modern world. The subaltern literature reflects various themes such as oppression, marginalization, gender, discrimination, subjugation of lower and working classes, disregarded women, neglected sections of the society, deprived classes. This paper analyses the subaltern literature based on the racial discrimination poems of Maya Angelou and Nissim Ezekiel.

Maya Angelou (4<sup>th</sup> April 1928 to 28<sup>th</sup> May 2014) was born in St. Louis Missouri, U.S.A. She is considered as the famous American poet and has dealt with the issues of race and gender. She confronts the insidious effects of racism and segregation in America at a very young age. Many personal incidents of racism have shaken her life. Her displacement and racial prejudice echo the larger societal forces that displaced blacks all across the country. Her poems like '*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*', '*Alone*' and '*Still I Rise*' reflect the discriminations faced by her in the country.

Nissim Ezekiel (16<sup>th</sup> December 1924 to 9<sup>th</sup> January 2004) was born in Bombay in Maharashtra in a Jewish family. He is considered as the foremost among the modern Indian English poets. He has adopted India as his mother land and wants to live here but he has to face lot of discrimination based on his Jewish origin. He has to bear the alienation, discrimination and torture in his life which is clearly presented in his poems. He indicates the prevailing feelings of religious and communal discrimination in the Indian society. He feels alienated due to his race and religion among the Hindus and Muslims. His poems '*Latter-Day Psalms*', '*Islands*', and '*Background Casually*' reflect his anger and agony of this racial discriminations in his native India.

**Keywords:** Racism, Identity, Gender, Caste, Language, Discrimination, Oppression, Deprived, Religion, Minorities.

### Introduction

Maya Angelou was an American author, poet, dancer, actress and singer. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, and several books of poetry. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees. She recited her poem "*On the Pulse of Morning*" at President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993. Her life was full of troubles and she had faced lot of discrimination based on her race. As writer Gary Younge says "To know her life story is to simultaneously wonder what on earth you have been doing with your own life and feel glad that you didn't have to go through half the things she has" (Younge). She has suffered a lot in her life from her childhood to adolescence. Even though she was a very great writer and poet but the world had not valued her as she was discriminated due to her black race. She declares:

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise. (Still I Rise, PH)

She did not bother about the torture which she got because of her race and she fought vehemently, passionately, vigorously and strongly to rise again to live in her land. She says that she would rise even though the world is against her and has

discriminated her due to her race and she says men are more alike than unlike which the people do not understand and all problems arises in the world due to hatred and racial anarchy. Nissim Ezekiel was an Indian Jewish poet, playwright, editor and art-critic. He was a foundational figure in postcolonial India's literary history, specifically for Indian writing in English. He was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award in 1983 for his poetry collection "*Latter-Day Psalms*". He was a Jewish writer lived and dedicated his life for the development of modern English literature of India but every step of his life, he had to face the identity crisis and racial discrimination that he has presented vividly and efficiently in his poems. Such a great writer who presented Indian ethos in his poetry has to face identity crisis and racial discrimination in his native nation, as he declares:

I've never been a refugee  
Except of the spirit  
A loved and troubled country  
Which is my home and enemy. (CP, p.209)

Even he says that his national and cultural identity is very much attached to this land and he tries to present this in his writings with proper images of the land.

Angelou and Ezekiel have to face lot of discriminations but they never feared and thus struggle to rise and live in their mother land and serving the citizens and the nations of their birth continued in their life and thus alienation, racism and identity crises are the themes which we can observe and study in their poems.

## 2. Identity and Racism

The Oxford dictionary defines the meaning of Identity crisis as a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. Erik Erikson coined the term identity crisis and believed that it was one of the most important conflicts people face in development. Many people in the world are facing the identity crisis due to their ethnicity. The concept originates in the work of developmental psychologist of identity is one of the most important parts of a person's life. It is a feeling of unhappiness and confusion when a person does not understand him and also his purpose in life. It can be defined as a state of confusion in an institution or organization regarding its nature or direction. "Lovecraft says that it is worst thing in the life of a person as no death, no doom, no anguish can arouse the surpassing despair which flows from a loss of identity" (H.P. Lovecraft). The Oxford dictionary defines Racism as the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races. Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on belief that one's own race is superior. Racism and discrimination have been used as powerful weapons encouraging fear or hatred of others in times of conflicts and war, and even during economic downturns. "Sivanandan describes racism as the increasing xenophobic culture of globalization seen in some parts of the world. Racism is conditioned by economic imperatives, but negotiated through culture, religion, literature, art, science and media" (Sivanandan).

## 3. Identity of Angelou and Ezekiel

Angelou tries hard to present her identity in her own native place, America. She presents that struggles in her seven autobiographies as she says this is the struggle of all black women of America. She says in her poem:

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
So he opens his throat to sing (I Know Why the  
Caged Bird Sings, PH)

She considers that she lost her identity in the mist of confusion and like a caged bird has no direction as she lives in the nightmares and she cries and tells her sufferings to the world. "The theme of identity was established from the beginning of Angelou's series of autobiographies, with the opening lines in Caged Birds which foretells Angelou's autobiographical project to write the story of the developing black female subject by sharing the tale of one Southern Black girl's becoming" (Manora, p.359). Angelou's theme of the individual's strength and ability to overcome appeared

throughout Angelou's autobiographies as she wants to tell the world about her identity crisis.

Nissim Ezekiel, being a Jew and an outsider faced identity crisis in India even though he writes and lives for India. "According to Dr. Shaila Mahan, Ezekiel falls into a category of the poets who have stayed back in India" (Mahan, p.44). He does not leave the country and tries to find his identity in this land and thus he says "Identity refers to the fact of being born in India, living amid its multiple economic and cultural complexities, identifying with them and making them the direct or indirect concerns of his work" (Shirish, p.6). He shows best the Indian ethos and civilizations in his poems and thus he says in an interview, "All my writing comes out of staying here. I am happy to be unhappy here rather than somewhere else. If I say anywhere, else I will be only unhappy. Here, at least the unhappiness makes sense, unhappiness leads to critical perceptions" (Havovi, p.48). He feels isolated as he belongs to alien Jew community and thus struggle to create his identity in the land. He presents this alienation and isolation in his poem "Prayer" as he is under the identity crisis.

Let me not be isolated  
Uninvolved in man's defeat, (CP, p.56)

He has faced all types of identity crisis and discrimination but he is stubborn to live in the country and does not like to leave the country and he finds his belongingness in this nation.

I cannot leave the island,  
I was born her and belong (CP, p.182)

He sees a difference between a real Indian and his Indianness and thus confuses himself as a true Indian even though he writes for India. A major Scottish poet says that "Ezekiel is not a real Indian like Parthasarathy and Ramanujam" (Havovi, p.44). He spent his fruitful days in India and after returning from a brief sojourn in London, he declares that it is his land where he wants to work and live.

I have made my commitments now.  
This is one: to stay where I am,  
As others choose to give themselves  
In some remote and backward place.  
My backward place is where I am (CP, p.181)

But the nation fails to appreciate him and considers him as an outsider as the custom of the world since this problem of identity crisis can be found in all the nations of the world.

The problems of identity crisis have become the unsolvable problems of the world. Thus, the poems of Angelou and Ezekiel present their struggle to show their identity in their own native places, America and India.

## 4. Racism in America and India

Angelou's use of themes especially that of racism, connects all her seven autobiographies which deals with the problems of her land. She tries to fight the racial discriminations of all the black women of America by writing her autobiographies. She has chosen the metaphor of a bird to voice her concern for the black women. "Angelou used the metaphor of a bird

struggling to escape its cage described in the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem “*Sympathy*” throughout her autobiographies; she used the metaphor in the titles of both *I Know Why Caged Bird Sings* and her sixth autobiography *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*.”(Long). The themes of her autobiographies and most of her poems are the injustice of racism and how to fight it and she dedicated her life for that great cause. She faced the racial problem from her childhood onwards. “Lupton says that like elements within a prison narrative, the caged bird represented Angelou’s confinement resulting from racism and oppression” (Lupton, p.38-39). She was forced to confine herself in the prison due to her race and thus her wings are crippled and she cannot fly from the confinement of oppressions of her land. She says:

Storm clouds are gathering  
The wind is gonna blow  
The race of man is suffering  
And I can hear the moan,  
Cause no body, But nobody can make it out here  
alone (Alone, PH)

She moans and cries for the liberation of her black people from clutches of racial discriminations. “Her descriptions of the strong and cohesive Black community of Stamps demonstrated how, African Americans have subverted repressive institution to withstand racism” (Mc Pherson, p.38). She narrated her difficulties through her poems. She says: “The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still and his tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, PH).

Her fight is for equality, justice and freedom for her people of America. She spends her life and dedicates her poetry for this great cause.

Ezekiel was born and brought up in India and even he did not live long in other countries and adopted this nation as his motherland but at every instant he faced the racial discriminations. In an answer to a question ‘Does the consciousness of being Jewish shape your work at all?’, “The poet replied with mixed feelings that although the Jews are living in India since 2000 years, they are not thought to be real Indians” (Havovi, p.44). The racial discriminations in his life start at his childhood as he narrates this experience vividly.

I went to Roman Catholic school  
A mugging Jew among the wolves  
They told me I had killed the Christ, (Background,  
Casually, CP)

This racial discrimination continues in his adult age and also he is considered as an outsider among the Indians. He said, “From the time I was seventeen, the attempt has been to become Indian, and that has meant responding to the Hindu tradition. The Jewish tended to be has among other traditions. Now I think that attempt of thirty years has been a failure. I see a great difference between a real Indian and my Indianness. (Havovi, p.44). This experience he narrates and says that even though he becomes a true Indian and writes about the ethos of India, but the problems of racial discriminations continue in his life among the majority Hindus

and Muslims of this nation consider him as an outsider. He says how he faced the discriminations.

A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.  
I grew in terror of the strong  
But understand Hindu lads  
Their prepositions always wrong (Background,  
Casually, CP)

Angelou and Ezekiel are the giants in the literary and social fields of their countries but they have to undergo identity crisis and racial discriminations in their own nations. They dedicated their lives for their nations but still their nations have biased, unfair, prejudiced and partial towards them.

## 5. Conclusion

Angelou was a great poet of her age and she possessed a multifaceted personality but the discriminations of race continue in her age in her own nation America for which she dedicated her life. She tries her best to fight the identity crisis and racial discrimination and boldly faced the fanatics of her land. She says:

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I’ll rise. (Still I Rise, PH)

She considers that she is the hope of all black women and also accepts the gifts given by her ancestors as she struggles and does her duty of rising from all identity crisis and racial discrimination.

Ezekiel considers that India is his nation and he goes to extend of declaring that he does not want to leave this country at any cost even he has faced lot of problems based on his ethnicity and religion in this country. He clearly says:

Confiscate my passport, Lord,  
I don’t want to go abroad.  
Let me find my song  
Where I belong. (CP, p.213)

His considers that India is his country and he is happy to live unhappily here in this land. “He emphasizes that he is being rooted in India and trying to come in terms with the ethos of India. He believes that Indianness is a thing of flesh and blood” (Shirish, p.6). He dedicates his life for the nation and his poetry deals the subjects of the nation.

Angelou and Ezekiel do not care about their racial discriminations and vehemently and boldly fight to defuse and resolve such unfairness and intolerance of their lands. The identity crisis and racial discrimination are the universal problems which should be addressed as the modern world is trying to assimilate, incorporate, understand, adapt, integrate and accommodate all the people of the globe through various ways of spreading and studying the subaltern literatures.

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