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The Struggle For Identity And Belongingness In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* And Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

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Abstract: The Struggle for Identity and Belongingness is the thing which is being endured by the throngs all around the world. The term identity refers to the origin and background of a particular person. There are different genres of identities which have a place to discuss such as Cultural, Social, Personal, Gender, sexual, religious and philosophical identity. Cultural Identity is something which differs according to the geographical location they born and the language they speak and the traditions they follow. Such an identity gets sacked when a foreign culture starts to dominate the existing one. People of the modern world have started using social media which gives access to all sorts of people to all sorts of cultures which acts as a Trojan horse to the prevailing culture. At some other cases, people who are living in a foreign or a neighborhood country have undeniably struggled for identity and belongingness. These struggles cause tension and restrictions to the victims. It questions the authenticity of our character and causes throngs to be dubious about their values, beliefs and personal characteristics. The personal experience of being uncertain about their identity cause doubt in their belongingness. The uncertainty alienates them from the society they are living in and causes them to remain at the edge of the wheel. There are some of the tremendous literary works that deal with the identity and belongingness.

Index Terms: Identity Crisis, Racism, Marginalization and Assimilation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The struggle for identity and belongingness is a radical theme in literature. It explores the human experiences, reflecting the complexities of self-definition and the universal desire for acceptance. People often grapple with questions of who they are and where they fit in, shaped by societal norms, cultural expectations, family dynamics, and personal experiences. The theme is particularly significant in marginalized communities, where race, gender, class, and historical oppression play critical roles in identity formation. Literature has explored these struggles, shedding light on the internal and external conflicts individuals face in their journey toward self-acceptance and social integration. The struggle for identity is mingled with assimilation and amalgamation sense of the culture. During the process, an individual undergoes an identity crisis, alienation, and scuffle to live a life in a peaceful mind. Psychologically they suffer to accept the nuances of the circumstances around them. They are as given below,

One of the most striking examples of the above theme is Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which examines how racial identity and beauty standards affect self-perception and belongingness. The protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, grows up in a society that equates beauty with whiteness. She internalizes the belief that possessing blue eyes will grant her acceptance and love, illustrating how external pressures distort self-worth. Pecola's tragic journey highlights the psychological impact of racial discrimination and societal rejection, demonstrating how marginalized individuals struggle to construct a positive identity when they are constantly devalued by dominant cultural narratives.

Similarly, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* portrays the struggle for identity and belonging through Holden Caulfield's alienation. As a disillusioned teenager, Holden finds himself unable to connect with the adult world, perceiving it as superficial and hypocritical. His resistance to grow up and his rejection of societal norms reflect a broader struggle for self-definition. Holden's isolation, both physical and emotional, underscores the challenges of forming an authentic identity in a world that demands conformity. His deep desire to protect innocence and resist change signifies a fear of losing one's sense of self in the process of societal integration.

The struggle for cultural identity is another powerful aspect of the theme, particularly in stories that explore immigrant experiences or racial identity. Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* follows Esperanza Cordero, a young Latina girl who struggles to reconcile her heritage with her aspirations for a better future. Esperanza's conflict arises from her desire to escape her impoverished neighbourhood while still maintaining a connection to her cultural roots. This tension between progress and belonging is a common struggle for those who feel caught between two worlds, highlighting the sacrifices and emotional turmoil involved in forging one's own identity.

In *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, the struggle for identity and belonging takes on historical and psychological dimensions. The novel explores the lasting trauma of slavery and its impact on self-perception. Sethe, the protagonist, battles with her past as she tries to reclaim ownership of her identity after enduring dehumanization. The ghost of her deceased daughter, Beloved, serves as a haunting reminder of the past, illustrating how historical oppression continues to shape personal identity. Morrison's novel underscores how identity struggles are not just personal but deeply rooted in collective historical experiences, affecting individuals across generations.

Gender identity and societal expectations also contribute to the struggles of identity and belonging. In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, the protagonist's fluid gender identity challenges traditional notions of self-definition and social roles. Orlando's transformation over centuries emphasizes how identity is not fixed but shaped by time, culture, and personal evolution. Similarly, in Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*, Celie's journey toward self-discovery is marked by oppression, self-doubt, and eventual empowerment. Her struggle to find her voice in a patriarchal society mirrors the experiences of many women who must navigate societal limitations to establish a sense of self-worth and belongingness.

In James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, John Grimes wrestles with his religious upbringing and his strained relationship with his stepfather. His internal battle reflects a broader conflict between personal identity and familial expectations. Similarly, in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Amir struggles with guilt and the need for redemption, illustrating how personal and familial acceptance are intertwined with identity formation.

Beyond literature, psychological theories support the significance of identity struggles in human development. Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development emphasizes the identity crisis as a crucial stage in adolescence, where individuals explore different roles and ideologies to establish a coherent sense of self. When societal pressures or personal insecurities hinder the process, individuals may experience confusion and alienation. This concept is reflected in many literary characters who undergo identity crises, questioning their values, beliefs, and place in the world.

In the novel *The Namesake* written by Jhumpa Lahiri has a deep root of the identity and belongingness crisis. It's about an Indian-American man struggle because of the wreck between his culture and the alien culture. His identity goes hanging because of these undetermined.

In the novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* written by Harper Lee explores the struggle of identity and belongingness through the character called Tom Robinson who is an innocent black man who is being accused of rape. There lies the identity crisis which causes innocents' life into a nightmare. In this novel, Racism plays a vital role to leave his life hanging.

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison spotlights the life a black man who lives in the prejudiced America. The prejudice causes him to oscillate above the two distinct cultures. The detachment fabricates the man to roam without a cultural identity.

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is also another crucial novel which deals with identity and belongingness. It projects the life a Nigerian woman in America. The cultural shock later leads to lose the cultural identity and initiates the search unattainable quest of belongingness.

White Teeth by Zadie Smith probes the multicultural identity, immigration and generational disputes of the two families living in London.

Maya Angelou was a prodigious American writer, memoirist, poet and civil right activist. She was born on April 4th 1928. She was an African by her birth. The Geographical location that Maya Angelou born was St. Louis, Missouri, United States of America. Maya had been leading her life by earning through different professions which facilitates Maya to write things by standing on the shoes of oppressed and destitutes. Maya has published seven autobiographies, three books of essays and few books of poetry spanning over 50 years. Maya has received several awards. Her seven autobiographies deal with her childhood and early adulthood experiences.

Ultimately, the struggle for identity and belonging is a deeply personal yet universally relevant theme. Literature provides a powerful lens to explore these struggles, offering insight into how individuals navigate societal expectations, cultural heritage, personal desires, and historical traumas. The journey toward self-acceptance is often fraught with obstacles, but it is also a testament to human resilience and the enduring quest for authenticity. Through the lens of race, gender, family, or personal growth, the search for identity and belonging remains one of the most compelling aspects of the human experience. These works illustrate how identity formation is deeply influenced by societal norms, family expectations, and historical oppression. Many characters face rejection, isolation, or self-doubt, revealing the emotional and psychological impact of belongingness. Ultimately, the journey to self-acceptance often requires breaking free from imposed identities and embracing individuality. Literature provides a powerful lens to explore these struggles, offering insight into the complexity of human identity and belonging.

The prolific writer Toni Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. She was the second of four children in a working-class African American family. Her parents, George and Ramah Wofford, instilled in her a deep appreciation for Black culture, folklore, and storytelling. Her father was a welder, told her folktales about the Black experience, which later influenced her literary style.

At an early age, Morrison developed a love for literature, reading authors like Jane Austen and Leo Tolstoy. She converted to Catholicism at the age of 12 and took the baptismal name Anthony, which later became the basis for her pen name, "Toni." She attended Howard University, a historically Black university in Washington, D.C., where she majored in English. While at Howard, she was exposed to the complexities of racial identity, which became a central theme in her writing. She graduated in 1953 and earned a Master's degree in English from Cornell University in 1955. Her master's thesis focused on the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, both of whom influenced her narrative techniques.

After completing her education, Morrison taught English at Texas Southern University and later returned to Howard University as a professor. At Howard, she met and married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, in 1958. They had two sons, Harold Ford and Slade Morrison, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1964. Following her divorce, she moved to Syracuse, New York, and later to New York City, where she worked as an editor at Random House. Morrison became the first Black woman senior editor in the fiction department. She played a crucial role in bringing Black literature to mainstream publishing, editing works by authors like Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gay Jones.

Morrison's career as a novelist began in the late 1960s. While working as an editor and raising two children as a single mother, she wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The novel explores issues of race, beauty, and self-worth through the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl who longs for blue eyes. The book initially received little attention but later became a cornerstone of African American literature. Her second novel, *Sula* (1973), examines female friendship, betrayal, and community dynamics in a Black neighbourhood. *Song of Solomon* (1977), her third novel, was a breakthrough success, earning the National Book Critics Circle Award and bringing her national recognition. Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), perhaps her most famous work, is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who killed her own child to prevent her from being recaptured. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in

1988 and solidified Morrison's status as one of America's greatest writers. Her later works, including *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), and *A Mercy* (2008), continued to explore themes of slavery, identity, and the Black experience.

In 1993, Morrison became the first Black woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel Committee praised her for giving "life to an essential aspect of American reality." She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barack Obama in 2012, the highest civilian honour in the U.S. Throughout her career, she also received the National Humanities Medal, the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, and numerous honorary degrees. Even in her later years, Morrison continued to write, lecture, and advocate for literature. She published *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015), both of which explore trauma and healing. Toni Morrison passed away on August 5, 2019, at the age of 88. Her legacy endures through her novels, essays, and impact on American literature and culture. Morrison's work is celebrated for its lyrical prose, deep psychological insight, and unflinching examination of race, gender, and history. She redefined how Black stories are told, centering the voices of Black women and communities that had been historically overlooked. Her influence extends beyond literature into academia, activism, and cultural discussions on identity and power. Today, her books remain essential reading, and her contributions continue to shape contemporary thought on race and literature.

II. THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND BELONGINGNESS - *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*.

Maya Angelou's remarkable novel, *I Know why the Caged Bird sings* (1969) has a prominence in literature and it deals with the life of Maya up to the age of 17. It has got international recognition and it has made her quite an eminent writer among the readers. As a writer of the autobiography, Maya transmutes her firsthand experience as a black girl living in the United States isolated by the natives and showering her with the discriminations like Racial, class, Gender, displacement, trauma and Self-acceptance.

In this book, the protagonist Marguerite exists in the southern state of America later in California. The book tails the life of Marguerite from the age of three till the age of seventeen. She lives in a society where the throngs think that the whites are superior to all. They look down at the black people like they are from a different planet. Such discrimination becomes the dawn for the ambiguous approach towards their identity and later, it creates the dubiousness towards their belongingness in the exotic nation with the exotic whites. "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." (Angelou 194)

The protagonist Maya is a young insecure Black girl living in the American South during the 1930s and in California during the 1940s. Initially, Maya's parents have divorced when she is only three years old and she and her brother Bailey have been sent to live with their Grandparents. Annie Henderson is their grandmother whom they call Momma. From their childhood itself Maya and Bailey have struggled a lot and they are isolated by their parents at a very young age. "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult." (Angelou 6)

At numerous occasions the society that Maya exists has made her believe that she is ugly and she doesn't fit in the society she lives. She believes that she doesn't hold any identity all by herself. She is tremendously being alienated by the white people for her race and extensively adding to this Maya also has that believe that she is ugly and the people of her own race also do so.

On a particular day Maya is reciting a poem in church and she has self-consciously started to presume that she is being ridiculed by the people gathered around. She immediately dashes out of the church having her eyes filled with tears. Her conjecture upon herself causes pretty many troubles in her life. There her identity lies skeptical. Her belongingness among the white throngs remains wavering.

Instead of being discriminated by others, Maya is discriminating herself from the society. It enhances her perspective of being an outlander. While articulating these things, Maya's life itself is being swept away by the tremendous waves of tragedy. The parents who have deserted Maya and Bailey at the age of three, at the age of eight her father has arrived back to Maya and he takes them back to their mother who lives in St. Louis, Missouri. "Can't do is like Don't Care. Neither of them have a home." (Angelou 258)

As a repercussion of the switch of place causes Maya endures a devastating blow. Maya is being raped by Mr. Freeman who is Vivian (Maya's Mom) boyfriend. Hitherto, Maya's identity is hanging with the help of a lean thread of hope but after being molested and raped her remaining courage has shattered into pieces.

Mr. Freeman gets the death penalty as the repercussion of his inhuman action. However, the death of Mr. Freeman brings considerable trauma and guilt into the life of Maya. At some point of time Maya gets something to relent on, which is book. Mrs. Bertha Flowers is one who brings Maya out of her trauma and dilemma. "One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed...a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful." (Angelou 138)

As she grows up, she meets different sorts of people. Maya gets to know the concept of Racism. "I was never again to sense myself so solidly outside the pale of the human race." (Angelou 246). Later, she starts to merge with the white people and works for a white woman. Everything is going fine until a white man articulates something odd in Maya's eighth-grade graduation. It ignites her skepticism on identity again. It torments Maya to an immense extent. The white man articulates that Black students are expected only to become athletes or servants, it creates permanent wound in Maya's heart.

Later her Momma takes Maya to a white dentist who articulates something humiliating. He says that he would rather place his hand in dog's mouth than in Maya's. Adding to these, Bailey finds a white man watching a rotting body of a Black man with utmost satisfaction which is quite excruciating. "They don't really hate us. They don't know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared." (Angelou 192)

After all these devastating injustices made by white towards Blacks roots Maya to be dubious about her identity. Fortunately, Maya gains her light and overcomes the traumas and becomes the first black streetcar conductor at the age of fifteen. "Anything that works against you can also work for you once you understand the Principle of Reverse." (Angelou 145)

III. **STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND BELONGINGNESS - THE BLUEST EYE.**

This paper explores the theme of the struggle for identity and belongingness. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a powerful exploration of the struggles for identity and belongingness, particularly within the context of race, beauty standards, and societal rejection. The significant characters, nine-year-old girl Claudia MacTeer and her ten-year-old sister Frieda MacTeer, live in an old house in Lorain, Ohio. Both are described as the victim of Pecola Breedlove. The novel portrays Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl who internalizes the idea that whiteness is beauty and worth; society makes her believe so. She thinks that "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike." (Morrison 45). Through Pecola's drastic experiences and those of other characters, Morrison critiques the destructive impact of racism and systemic oppression on self-acceptance and identity crisis.

One of the central struggles in *The Bluest Eye* is racial identity. The Black characters in the novel live in a society that upholds Eurocentric beauty standards, equating whiteness with desirability and value. Pecola, conditioned by this racist ideology, believes that having blue eyes make her beautiful. She prays for blue eyes, seeing them as a gateway to belonging. "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes." (Morrison 46). This internalized racism leads to a fractured sense of self, where she sees her Blackness as a flaw rather than an identity to embrace. Other characters also experience racial identity struggles. Geraldine, a Black woman who distances herself from darker-skinned Black people, and Maureen Peal, a light-skinned girl who enjoys privileges Pecola does not, demonstrate how racism creates divisions within the Black community. The self-hatred and internalized oppression highlight the devastating effects of a society that denies Black children, especially girls, the right to feel beautiful and worthy.

The novel illustrates how beauty standards shape self-worth and belonging. Shirley Temple, a symbol of white beauty, becomes an obsession for Claudia MacTeer, who initially resents being forced to admire her. However, Claudia resists the idea that whiteness is superior, unlike Pecola, who fully internalizes the belief. Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove, also idolizes whiteness, preferring the white family she works for over her own. Pecola's yearning for blue eyes reflects her desperate need for acceptance. Pecola feels that "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs, the world has agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured."

(Morrison 20). So, she believes that if she was beautiful by white standards, people would treat her with kindness and love. Instead, society continuously reinforces her sense of ugliness, culminating in her psychological breakdown. Her tragic fate underscores how impossible and damaging it is for Black children to conform to a beauty ideal that excludes them.

Belongingness is closely tied to family and community, yet Pecola is alienated from both. The Breedlove household is filled with violence, neglect, and self-hatred. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, is abusive and deeply traumatized, lashing out in destructive ways. Her mother, Pauline, prioritizes her job over her daughter, rejecting Pecola in favour of the white family she serves. Instead of receiving love and affirmation at home, Pecola is met with rejection, reinforcing her belief that she is unworthy.

Pecola's community also fails to provide her with a sense of belonging. She is mocked, ridiculed, and ostracized by both children and adults. Even those who show her temporary kindness, like Maureen Peal, ultimately distance themselves from her. The collective rejection leaves Pecola utterly alone, with no support system to help her navigate her identity struggles. "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different." (Morrison 46)

The pressure to conform to an unattainable identity leads to Pecola's psychological breakdown. She ultimately believes she has been granted blue eyes, a delusion that isolates her even further. The tragic conclusion reveals the devastating consequences of identity struggles when individuals are denied self-worth and belonging. Morrison uses Pecola's fate to critique the racial and societal structures that crush the self-esteem of Black children. Rather than portraying Pecola as simply weak, Morrison shows how systemic racism, poverty, and familial dysfunction work together to destroy her sense of self.

IV. CONCLUSION

The novel *I know why the Caged Bird sings* spotlights the issue of identity and belongingness in the lives of people across the world. The paper analyzes and articulates the imperativeness of the identity and self-belief through the life of Maya. As a conclusion, a proper identity makes an individual congenial with the society they live. The novel showcases the shade of racism that lies in the hearts of white and takes shape by the way they treat Blacks. Maya as a black girl struggles a lot among those racists and molds herself to be a better and considerable woman.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* powerfully illustrates the devastating impact of racialized beauty standards, systemic oppression, and social exclusion on the formation of identity and the sense of belonging. Through Pecola Breedlove's tragic journey, Morrison critiques a society that marginalizes and devalues Blackness, forcing individuals to internalize self-hatred and yearn for unattainable ideals. The novel reveals how identity is shaped by both personal experiences and societal perceptions, highlighting the damaging consequences of rejection, whether from family, community, or the dominant culture. Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* serves as a poignant commentary on the struggles of self-acceptance and the need for a more inclusive and affirming definition of beauty and belonging.

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