



# Afro-American Identity of American Blacks in Maya Angelou's fiction *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*.

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## Abstract:

Maya Angelou is prominently known as the pioneer of Afro-American women writing. She was a bold and an honest writer who talked about the real issues of Afro-Americans in the United States of America, to be precise Afro-Americans were second-class citizens in their own country. Maya Angelou has talked about what it means to be an Afro-American to American, and Blacks in her novel *All God's children Need Travel Shoes*.

Maya Angelou talks about finding a home where they can proudly identify themselves as its citizen's not just second-class citizens, and where they can feel that they belong to that country and in which they can be safe and identify themselves as its true inhabitants. It's harsh to witness that one group of people were and to some extent still are questioned about their identity and targeted by the White supremacists in their own country, what can be worse than this? In their very own country they are foreigners. Her novel *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* reveal the trauma of Black people in a great detail who were looking for home, filled with love humanity and sense of belongingness.

**Keywords:** Identity crisis, Afro-Americans, Maya Angelou, Second-class Citizens. White Supremacists, American Blacks, Home.

Maya Angelou was an amazing woman with multi talents, Maya Angelou was an American poet, memoirist, and a great civil rights activist. Maya Angelou has written seven autobiographies, which are considered as fictions for the techniques she has used in writing them. She has written three essays, and several of amazing poetry collections. Maya Angelou's poetry collection named as 'Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie (1971) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Maya Angelou was not only interested in writing she was very much interested in acting career too and she has acted in so many off-Broadway plays including *Calypso Heatwave* in 1957 and *The Blacks* in 1960. In her later life from 1954 to 1955 she had an opportunity to take part in musical tour named as *Porgy and Bess*, which was sponsored by U.S. Department of state. Maya Angelou was very talented she continued to produce, direct and act in stage productions.

In 1974 she directed the film called *All Day Long*, and in 1988 she directed the film called as *Down in Delta*. Maya Angelou was also invited by so many universities to be the faculty of teaching, some of them were University of California, and University of Kansas, and Wake Forest University. Maya Angelou was recipient of more than 50 honorary degrees, from Mills College, Smith Collage, Lawrence University, and Wake Forest University and so many more.

In 1993 Maya Angelou was invited to perform a reading of her famous poem called as ‘*On the Pulse of Morning*’ at the inauguration of U.S. President Bill Clinton. Maya Angelou known as one of the strong voice of Afro-American literature, she gave hope and courage a belief to all those racially oppressed people to raise up and believe in themselves to live their life and to fight for their rights.

Maya Angelou’s first and best known fiction *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) acclaimed a great appreciation and critical reviews, and later on she wrote 6 more novels in the series of her autobiographies. Maya Angelou’s fifth novel *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* had a mixed reaction with ups and downs comparing it with her first novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, but the most of the reviews of the novels were great and so many critics appreciated the honesty of Maya Angelou’s writing and her boldness.

Connie Martinson told Maya Angelou, “You make me the reader....live through it with you”. And Houston A. Baker Jr. in his review of the book, called Maya Angelou “one of the geniuses of Afro-American serial autobiography”. This novel talks predominately about Afro-Americans and finding a home for American Black community.

Maya Angelou comes to Ghana in search of welcome in search of belongingness from Egypt, when she got divorced from her husband hoping that she will find the solace in her ancestral country Africa, and also the peace of mind in the culture and love of African people. Maya Angelou meets couple of fellow Americans and they make a group of American expatriates, but it was very hard for Maya Angelou to feel that she was in her home, even though Africa is the country from which her ancestors do have legacy, but deep down no matter what she always felt American so she was torn between these identities, and she was constantly confused with her own identity.

The definition of identity crisis is, “a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person’s sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to change in their expected aims or role in society”, numerous Black people go through this Identity Crisis every single day. They are very much part of their nation as any other White counterpart of their society. But the society, its law systems, and the people who are there to protect the general population asks for the identity of these Black people.

Just imagine being interrogated or discriminated every single day to prove yourself as an American, just because your skin colour is Black that's treacherous, no any other white person go through this inhuman treatment, because they are white and they have the privilege of being a White person, Whiteness should not be the pillar to judge one's own identity.

If you become a foreigner in your own home country, where one can go in this world? Your childhood is there in that country, your memories are made in that country, it's a part of your life, it's a part of who you are, and it's very hard to put ourselves in their shoes at all. Because of this identity crisis Black people are losing their home, their family, their livelihood, their jobs, and their mentally being affected by this.

So many black families are in clinical depression, it's creating a harmful atmosphere in their society. It has become a reason for them to indulge into violent activities and create many violent gangs. Maya Angelou was a tremendous woman who faced a lot of difficulties due to her skin colour the infamous Racism has put its shadows on Maya Angelou too. Maya Angelou was the voice of the voiceless Black people, who faced dilemma of life in their lives due to the injustice they suffered by the hands of White people in America.

The country America which was built by the slaves who were Black people, and their identity is questioned all the time, in that very country which they have built as plantation slaves. History shows that they are the pillars of modern America and still they can't shrug the age old identity crisis which comes from Racism and Slavery.

In her novel called as *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoe*, Maya Angelou talks about being in Ghana in South Africa which is basically the home of Black people and how she was so amused and so happy to finally arrive and live where she thought she belonged, and the feeling didn't last for a longer time. When she settled in Ghana she was so happy to see black faces and very happy to identify herself with them, being black and identifying herself as one was no more a crime at all in Ghana, but in America it was always a crime according to White supremacists, and because of prejudiced people she always stood out of group, she was always observed as a deferent phenomenon in America by these White gazes but not anymore in Ghana, she was part of the million people as general population, not as one in million as different person in general population.

Very painfully a reader can see how Afro-Americans were trying to identify themselves with a true home, their innateness about finding a home was very visible. Maya Angelou writes in detail about how an Afro-American group found itself longing for a home in Ghana, even though they were in their ancestral country and felt secure, happy and everywhere they could see beautiful Black faces yet they felt alienated, because they didn't have any ties any real connection with the Ghana.

They didn't have their childhood in Ghana, and they didn't have great memories of life in Ghana, their all connections were with America, even though they were subjected to discrimination they were connected to it by their birth, there they had ties with families and they had memories of childhood and growing up, even though they might have been bit here and there bad ones, but with all its problems that was their home.

It was a big question for Maya Angelou too weather to identify herself as American or African or Afro-American. Weather to identify herself with African heritage or American modernism. This Identity crisis has put Afro-Americans in a very harsh situation, they have to put up an extra effort to make ends meet in their life than any other person, it's because how people differentiated and still are differentiating them from mass people, and questioning their identity all the time.

Maya Angelou came to Ghana in hope that she will find a home which she had longed for a long time. Believing that she was meant to live in Africa, which has ancestral connections to her family, for time being she loved being their but she always felt that she missed something so deep, a natural connection to the beautiful land of Africa.

Even the people of Ghana judged the American Blacks, they never could fully accept them as true Africans. Maya Angelou narrates a story in the novel *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, one day Maya Angelou visited the Ghana Broadcasting office for the Times newspaper office for a job to be a writer in the newspaper.

She meets the receptionist there and asks for her help to know the office of the person who is in charge, but she doesn't help her. Instead she gives the sarcastic smile and asks Maya Angelou, you may meet whoever you want to meet you better know the name of the person you want to meet. Again Maya Angelou very politely asks her that I am here to write for the newspaper you must be knowing whom to meet for that, the receptionist replies that see I am a receptionist here it's my job to know everyone and she further says unless you know whom to meet don't bother me, and obviously the receptionist's this cruelty angered Maya Angelou and she says to her that, "you silly ass, you can take flying leap and go straight to hell" for this she smiles sarcastically and she utters that "American Negroes are always crude". (Angelou, 37).

Maya Angelou so aghast that she couldn't utter a single word she could not defend her American Black people. This incident shows that no matter how much American Blacks claim to be a part of Africa, they were always seen to be or viewed as an outsider in Africa, which they believed it to be their home.

It's so frustrating for Black people to feel the identity crisis both in America and even in Africa. In America they are looked as Africans and discriminated and in Africa they are looked as spoiled American Black people and they neither have belongingness in America or in Africa. But somehow Maya Angelou try to put these insecurities aside and tried to embrace Ghana as her home.

Maya Angelou asks herself that this differentiation of identity in the ancestral home of Africa, might have been a possible outcome of American Blacks being slaves, the unfortunate history we had as slaves, or might have been a possible outcome of hearsay of American Black people or the negative portrayal of American Black people in the movies.

Maya Angelou further says in her novel that, "The receptionist and I could have been sisters, or in fact, might be cousins far removed. Yet her scorn no different from the supercilious rejections of whites in the United States. In Harlem, and in Tulsa, in San Francisco, and in Atlanta, in all the hamlets and cities of America, black people maimed, brutalized, abused and murdered each other daily and particularly on bloody Saturday nights. Were we only and vainly trying to kill that

portion of our history which we could neither accept nor deny? The question temporarily sobered my intoxication with Africa". (Angelou, 38)

These above lines talk enough about Africans not embracing the American Blacks as their own people, and struggles in identifying them as their own family members and she also talks about the brutal reality of Black people fighting their own people, having the identity issue has put them in the darkest place.

It's so disheartening to imagine, and feel what Black people suffer through their life, their quest of finding the home where they feel safe, loved, cared and nourished is so difficult. Their own country in which their entire existence is present their identity is questioned as if like they don't matter to that country, and if they try to attach themselves with their ancestral country they are looked with lenses of American Blacks by their fellow brothers and sisters of Africa, it's an absolute never ending saga for Black Americans to find a home at all.

There are so many incidents in the novel which puts American Blacks in the grey area of not being fully American and also not being completely an African, because no matter what, they will be having the parts of being American in their life since they are born in America, and their memories are tied to the land of America.

At the other hand their tradition and culture is indeed very much linked with the culture of Africa, because their legacy starts with Africa, their ancestors one's were the inhabitants of Africa, so they are in part of Africans too, so both are very essential to Black people at the same time. So it can be safe to say that Black people can call themselves as an Afro-American to feel the sense of identity, to feel that they belong somewhere in this vast world.

In the end of the novel Maya Angelou said that, "if the heart of Africa still remained allusive, my search for it had brought me closer to the understanding myself and other human beings. The ache for home lives in all of us the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned. It impels mighty ambitions and dangerous capers. We amass great fortunes at the cost of our souls, or risk our lives in drug dens from London's Soho, to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury. We shout in Baptist churches, wear yarmulkes and wigs and argue the tiniest points in the Torah, or worship the sun and refuse to kill cows for the starving. Hoping that by doing these things, home will find us acceptable of failing that, that we will forget our awful yearning for it. My mind was made up. I would go back to the united states as soon as possible". (Angelou, 215)

Maya Angelou came to Ghana with the pure intention of settling there and making it as her new home, but she all along knew that she was always belonged to America, and she made it very clear to everyone that by birth America was her home and the memories were all there, and she felt lost in any other place rather than America, but being African was always the core of who she was and it never left her ever at all.

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