Chapter III:

My Lord, What a Morning

Autobiography of Marian Anderson
As mentioned in the earlier chapters, the key to understanding an autobiography lies in the spoken or unspoken justification given for writing it. In the case of *My Lord, What a Morning*, there is no formal introduction to the book which will give us a glimpse of the author's intentions. One can only draw conclusions from the main narrative text. And though Marian Anderson does not say so outright, it becomes clear as one reads the book that she was cajoled into writing the book by "her people" and by writing her life-story she was repaying in part the debt she owed to her community. In chapter 16 of *My Lord, What a Morning*, she says: "I sang in Russia for the same reason I have sung anywhere else-- to make music. After all, it proved that one of my people could be raised up freely in the United States to do the work the Lord had given him the gift to do." Hidden in these words is the justification for writing her autobiography. For, her autobiography is an edifying text too, very much inspired by the Sunday school sermons she was so influenced by. The title, which is a line taken from one of the Negro spirituals she routinely sang, also points to the great influence of the Union Baptist Church on her life.

*My Lord, What a Morning* seems to have been written due to the insistence and pressures from "her people". It has not been written due to an inner urge or as a creative outlet or cathartic experience. It is a moralistic tale told by a member of an
underprivileged group who "made it". Her life has been documented due to outside pressures to serve as a model, as an inspiration for others of her group. She sees herself linked to society, to her community and like Pearl S. Buck sees her own Self and her personal leanings as insignificant indeed. As she says in the chapter titled "Easter Sunday": "I could see that my significance as an individual was small in this affair. I had become, whether I liked it or not, a symbol, representing my people. I had to appear."(189) Similarly, she *had* to write her life-story because she was a symbol of hope and success for her people.

But for Marian Anderson, giving a concert recital was very different from writing an autobiography. She has confessed many times in *My Lord, What a Morning* that she was no literary person. Reading was a chore for her and writing was even more of a chore. Even writing letters was a tedious job: "The generous interest of the people is wonderful to have, but I must admit that the flow of letters is a bit of an embarrassment to me. I would like to answer them all, but I am one of the world's worst correspondents. My husband has attempted to answer some for me, and my sisters now take care of some. I do not have a secretary to travel with me; occasionally I bring in a girl for a few days and dictate a lot of replies."(270) It is difficult to believe that a poor letter-writer should actually get down to writing
a full autobiography. But the modus operandi that Marian Anderson applied for replying to letters seems to have been used even in writing her autobiography.

Her autobiography reads like the outcome of a series of interviews given by her. The narration is flat and the arrangement of the text strictly chronological, at least till the chapter "Easter Sunday". There are no asides, very few dialogues, and no peep into the inner workings of Marian Anderson's mind. Like her life, which was ruled solely by music, her autobiography too is uni-dimensional, rarely if ever, straying too far away from the topic of music. From the second chapter itself the references to music begin: "When I completed grammar school I went on to high school. The first I attended was William Penn High School, where I started with the idea of taking a commercial course. I knew deep in my heart by this time that what I wanted most was to study music, but I also knew that I had to prepare myself to get a job as soon as possible—both to help Mother and to have some money for music studies. A friend of the family had told us that if I learned to type and take dictation her husband would place me in a job.

Unhappily, I did not get along too well in the shorthand classes and I found myself in deeper waters with the bookkeeping
course. My heart was not in these studies, and I was happiest when we had our music period once a week." (21)

The autobiography is thus totally focused in its main aim—that of documenting the rise of a singer in a world still divided by racism. These references to music begin from the second chapter and by the third chapter the narration has neatly honed in on the main purpose of describing Marian Anderson's musical career. One gets the impression that Marian Anderson did not have a life, or association or relationship that was not music-related. And this perhaps is truly the case. Marian Anderson, as she emerges from the book, did not believe in loyalty to friendships due to sentimental reasons. She had no second thoughts about dropping old acquaintances or friendships for new ones for furthering her musical career. She describes her first real teacher thus: "The lady he took me to see was Mary Saunders Patterson, a Negro who lived not too far from our house. She had a magnificent soprano voice, and she had studied uptown, as we called it, with a real vocal teacher. After listening to me, she told me that she would like to teach me what she knew. She charged a dollar a lesson, which Mr. Butler knew, and he had decided in his generosity that he would pay for the instructions out of his own pocket.

Mrs. Patterson waited until he was out of the room and asked whether my family was prepared to pay for the lessons. I was
compelled to tell her that we could not afford them. She said that she
did not believe that young people just starting on what might be long
careers should have obligations or strings attached to them, no matter
how unselfish or noble the offer of help might be. She offered to give
me the lessons free of charge.

I stayed with Mrs. Patterson for quite a few months. It was
she who first taught me that in singing you must not call on your
capital, that you must use your voice so that your capital remains
intact. It was she, too, who showed me first the song by Schumann,
'Die Rose die Lilie, die Taube, die Sonne.' It was Mrs. Patterson who
presented me with my first real evening gown." (35-36).

Mrs Patterson, who did so much for Marian Anderson is
mentioned very briefly and only in the context of her role as a teacher.
What were Marian Anderson's relations with her? How was Patterson
as a person? Marian Anderson does not dwell on these questions. This
is typical of a person who is destined for greater things. Marian
Anderson sees Mrs Patterson merely as one more step towards her
goal. A few pages later Marian Anderson remarks :"When the time
came for a change of teacher, it was Mrs Patterson who urged it. I was
sent to Agnes Reifsnyder". (47) About this teacher Marian Anderson
says: "Beyond these things, I cannot remember much about my
studies with Miss Reifsnyder. I was so busy with so many things in
those days that other events have remained more vivid in my memory". (48) What other events is Marian Anderson referring to? She does not elaborate. That would be digressing from the main topic of technicalities of singing. She keeps to a strict linear progression. This system lends to the narration a flatness and documentary tone that hides the Self of the author. The documentation of her life-story has been based on strict rules and regulations. And there is obvious editorial control over the narration.

In fact one of the most revealing sentences of My Lord. What a Morning, is tucked unobtrusively on the top corner of the index page. There, in small type, are given the words: "For editorial and critical assistance in the preparation of this book the author is deeply indebted to Mr. Howard Taubman of The New York Times." How much and how far was the influence of Mr Taubman in the shaping of My Lord. What a Morning is unknown. But it is clear that the strictest censorship and control has gone into the writing of this autobiography. Though there is no formal acknowledgement of the scope of Mr Taubman's involvement in the autobiography, the narration and form of the autobiography point to it being ghost-written, and to it being the textual version of a series of tape-recorded interviews. As a result of this, all spontaneity has been completely erased from the narration. The author never loses her patience, never
conveys at any time a feeling of anger against anyone or anything, in fact never says anything negative without hastily correcting it and giving a detailed explanation. The tone is of extreme caution and diffidence. The author is careful to be politically correct always. This gives rise to an altogether bland narration. Life is full of bittersweet experiences and recording them truthfully and interestingly makes for an enjoyable reading. But the author here is careful not to ruffle any feathers, not to project even a whiff of combativeness in the tone. A typical sentence might go like this: "Even in those days I tried to have clothes that were simple in design but made of good material and effective in appearance... I think that my people felt a sense of pride in seeing me dressed well." And immediately there is a hasty clarification: "I don't mean that they were unaccustomed to good things and a good appearance. Quite a few of them owned handsome clothes and knew how to dress attractively. But it made them feel good, I found out, to see one of their own pleasantly got up."(110)

This tone of extreme political correctness runs like a thread through the narrative.

Describing her purchase of the first set of fine furniture from her earnings, she says: "By this time we were busy buying furniture for our little house. I remember making the purchases in a store where the salesman was named Mr. Mann. When I chose things that were
comparatively expensive, he complimented me on my good
taste... We did not intend to spend our last penny on furniture any
more than we would have on food or clothes. But we hoped to get
good things, and we thought we would be able to pay for them in
monthly instalments". And then comes the author's usual clarification
"That furniture is still in the little house. The wood and construction
were good; we got value for our money". (85) She is eager to prove
that she was not rising above her station in a hurry.

She is, as she mentions often, a "reluctant symbol". She does
not wish to expend her energies on being a social reformer. She just
wants to be left free to pursue her music and excel in it. As she says
repeatedly in the book: "One has to be true to one's own nature." In
one of the rare flashes of self-analysis she says in the Chapter "Easter
Sunday": "It would be fooling myself to think that I was meant to be a
fearless fighter; I was not. Just as I was not meant to be a soprano
instead of a contralto." (188) Here too she describes herself in
musical terms.

Talking of the adverse treatment that she sometimes
encountered in certain Southern hotels, her reaction is typical: "If I
were inclined to be combative, I suppose I might insist on making
issues of these things. But that is not my nature, and I always bear in
mind that my mission is to leave behind me the kind of impression
that will make it easier for those who follow." (244)

The cautious and careful tone of the book reflects Anderson's
philosophy of life and her career moves. There was this definite fear
during the initial phase of her musical career that if she became too
vocal or combative about racial matters, she might be pushed into the
margins and musically get ghettoised as a Black singer for Black
audiences. Her aim was to enter the mainstream. She knew she had
the potential to make it big. Being too vocal about racial matters too
early in her career would stamp her as a "Black musician". So she
opted for a low profile, for a policy of least resistance. This was the
only way she could reach out to larger audiences and transcend its
"Blacks only" composition. This policy of least resistance obviously
paid off. In Chapter 9, titled "Contest", she talks about the benefits of
winning the first prize in the contest organised by the Philadelphia
Philharmonic Society:

"The newspapers published reports of the contest and the name of the
winner, the first Negro to take first prize, and this, in turn, caused
people of my group to be curious about my capacities. When I sang in
a hall instead of in a church, there were quite a few white people in
the audience. Since I hoped to have a career not confined to singing to
one group or a limited circuit the occasion represented considerable
progress." (101) And towards the end of the book, in Chapter 22, titled "The Highest and the Lowest", she has this to say: "Over the years the audiences for my concerts have been changing. Whereas they were entirely my own people at the start, later they were predominantly white." (248)

It is clear from what she says again and again in the book that she wants to be remembered by posterity as a "good singer", not as a "good Black female singer". But destiny had other things in store for her and she was thrust willy-nilly into the limelight as a representative of "her people", and is now remembered by history as "the first Black to give a recital at Lincoln Memorial." This categorisation was exactly what she was trying to avoid. She wanted her music to transcend the artificial and man-made boundaries of colour, sex, and nationality. Music, according to her, should not have these barriers and her unspoken message is that true musicians are bound together by a common thread of excellence. In the Chapter titled "Home Again" she says: "Kosti Vehanen had been my accompanist in Europe, appearing with me in Scandinavia and other European countries. Billy King had been my accompanist in the United States. Who should be my accompanist when I come back to the U.S.? ...The issue went deeper. If I did not use Billy King some of my own people might be offended...I knew in my heart that the right decision
would be the one taken on musical grounds... And so it was. Kosti Vehanen came, and he stayed."

What she does not mention of course, is that having a white accompanist was also a clever political statement. Although she chooses to keep quiet about this aspect, her later statements prove that she could not have been unaware of the political implications of having a White accompanist:

"When I arrived at the hall I did not see the local manager. The hall was full; there were some fifteen hundred persons, and they were wonderful. When we finished the German group there was tremendous applause. France Rupp and I returned for a bow. The applause grew louder. We went off and returned, and this time, as is my custom, I took my accompanist's hand. For a split second the house was quiet and then there was a deafening outburst of applause... The manager did not show herself backstage. We went straight to the railroad station and took an overnight train. At last the men decided to tell me what had angered them.

Before I had arrived for the rehearsal the lady manager had appeared and said, 'I understand that she goes out on stage holding her accompanist's hand, and we won't stand for that here.' 'Miss Anderson would not think of coming here and telling you how to run your business,' Jofe replied. 'She has been on the stage long enough to know how to take care of her own business.'

I never sang in that town again, and it may not make any difference. But there were fifteen hundred people in that hall for whom one person was making a decision, and they had shown that they could make their own. It struck me that this one woman was assuming a heavy responsibility in thinking that she could decide for them."(245-246)

At the same time, though Marian Anderson would not want talented youngsters from her group to be discriminated against, she would also not want them to be given concessions either because of
their colour: "There are young singers of exceptional talent who have sung with important opera companies in our country and abroad. There will be others. One does not expect them to be accepted because they are Negroes; one hopes that they will be welcomed only for their worth."(305)

So, although Anderson wished to rise above the boundaries of colour, caste, religion, sex, country, etc., the political climate of the U.S. at the time that she peaked in her singing career was such that it was her colour and not her talent that became the focus of attention. Like it or not, Anderson was thrust into the limelight as a representative of a particular group. So overriding and complete was the importance of her recital at Lincoln Memorial Centre that the chapter describing that day - "Easter Sunday" - is, in effect, the focal point of My Lord, What a Morning. It is the 17th Chapter of the book and comes approximately in the middle of the book. In fact, if one looks at the arrangement of chapters in My Lord, What a Morning from a musical point of view, one can say that all the first sixteen chapters are actually working towards this important seventeenth chapter. By the sixteenth chapter, the book reaches a crescendo. Each and every sentence in this chapter is important because it conveys all that Anderson strove for in her life, in her music. The whole tone of the chapter is careful, defensive. Marian Anderson seems almost
apologetic about her role in politicising the Lincoln Memorial recital.

There is the underlying suggestion that she was "used", that things were taken away from her hands after a point. : "As I have made it clear, I did not feel that I was designed for hand-to-hand combat, and I did not wish to make statements that I would later regret. The management was taking action. That was enough." (189) Like Pearl S. Buck, who did not want to highlight her "different-ness" but wanted rather to blend-in, Marian Anderson too did not like the idea of focusing on her colour. She had spent years trying to deflect attention away from her colour and concentrating on her talent. The Lincoln Memorial Recital was going to turn this whole equation upside down. She states her confusion over the issue: "Indeed, I was asked whether I approved. I said yes, but the yes did not come easily or quickly. I don't like a lot of show, and one could not tell in advance what direction the affair would take. I studied my conscience. In principle the idea was sound, but it could not be comfortable to me as an individual". (189)

She talks about her role in this episode, the impact of this performance and how it changed her life completely. The importance of the performance on racial relations in the U.S. and how it acted as a catalyst to bring about sweeping legal and political changes in the U.S. is also mentioned. This is also the only chapter where one gets a
little glimpse of the inner workings of Marian Anderson's mind. She
has poured all her energy and her passion, on this one chapter. The
earlier chapters are merely a prelude and the chapters that come after
"Easter Sunday" are almost like tag-ons. The importance of this
chapter in the total scheme of the book can be gauged by the fact that
all chapters preceding it are more or less chronological and give a
systematic and step-by-step documentation of Marian Anderson's
progress towards a musical high. With "Easter Sunday", Marian
Anderson had reached the apex, musically and socially. She could not
possibly have gone higher. So, this chapter is in effect, the grand
finale of the book. After it, the writer seems to be at a loss as to how
to continue the narration. The creative energies have all been
expended by chapter 17 and after that the chapters are not
chronological but taken up topic-wise, almost like an after thought.

The chapter succeeding "Easter Sunday" is titled "Songs I
Sing" and in it the author talks about the songs she likes to sing before
audiences, her reasons for selecting them etc. She talks, in effect,
about her craft. In that respect it is an important chapter without
which the autobiography of a famous performer like Marian Anderson
would have been incomplete. But it does not flow with the rhythm of
the earlier chapters and especially with the preceding chapter, either
chronologically or thematically. The rest of the chapters, like chapter
"Notes on the Voice", chapter 20, "On the Road" are all taken up topic-wise. These chapters give the distinct impression of being the result of a series of topic-related interviews. One rarely gets a glimpse of the Self of the author. She discusses her art, she talks about her home and husband, her numerous travels, but all this unemotionally and almost disinterestedly.

In a short chapter titled "Husband and Home", she gives a glimpse into her life when she is not performing. She tries to spend the summers in the "dream house" her architect husband designed and built, but admits that she is "away from home entirely too much," and that though she would have loved to be a proper home-maker, she can "function only on a part-time basis." Marian Anderson married late and gives the credit for the success and survival of her marriage to her husband, who, she says, is "an understanding person, and without such a man our marriage would not have worked out". Apart from this and apart from mentioning that he is an architect, stays in their home at Connecticut, is handy with his hands, loves to watch TV, she does not describe deeply her relationship with her husband. It is almost as though her role as a wife is secondary to her role as a singer. Or maybe, describing her experiences as a wife is outside the scope of this book. This conscious or unconscious focus on only one role—Marian Anderson, the singer—strengthens one's belief in My Lord.
What a Morning being the product of a series of interviews. She admits to having vaguely planned a family, "but I had more concert work than ever before and we postponed other things." There is a tiny note of regret when she says, "When I see other people with children, I wonder whether our decision was right... Perhaps I should have been more daring." But the note of regret is quickly brushed away and she bounces back on the track with the line that recurs repeatedly in the book like a chime and which is in effect Marian Anderson's motto in life: "But one has to be true to one's own nature", she says and continues, "It left me no choice but to make this additional sacrifice which King shares." (292)

What is noteworthy about this autobiography is the fact that Anderson describes herself almost entirely on the basis of her music, and her public persona. Not for her the mundane dichotomies of public and private. She is above this division because music is her life. Her happiness and unhappiness arise from it. From the book it emerges clearly that the focus of her life was her music. Everything else was secondary: "It took a long time before the old conviction returned that nothing in life could be as important as music." (76)

So totally does Marian Anderson identify herself with her music and so completely has it seeped into every aspect of her life that it is impossible for her to think of herself as separate from it. She
is a wife later, a daughter later, a Black American later, a pupil later, a 
woman later. First and foremost she is a singer. Her dedication and 
devotion to her art is total. This is the reason why out of the twenty-
eight chapters in *My Lord, What a Morning*, twenty-two chapters 
have to do with her singing and only six talk about her life apart from 
it, which includes chapters on her childhood and her formative years. 
This does not indicate any evasion on her part but points to the 
complete blending of the identities of Marian Anderson, the singer 
and Marian Anderson, the woman.

Like Pearl S. Buck's *My Several Worlds*, *My Lord, What a 
Morning* too betrays a kind of restless energy that reflects the 
nomadic lifestyle of its author. The chapter headings too refer to 
places and point towards Marian Anderson's life of constant travel. 
They point to the expansion of her horizons, geographically as well as 
socially. By the end of the book we realise that Marian Anderson has 
travelled a great distance—a distance far above her humble origins. 
The scope and level of her travels improves as well. While earlier she 
travelled in the second class compartments of dubious trains and 
stationed at people's houses, by the end of the book we see her travelling 
with a large entourage, by air, by ship and staying at the best hotels in 
the world and fraternising with the cream of society. Although the 
comparison between her earlier and later travel conditions is not
undertaken on a one-to-one basis, the chapter headings point to the importance she placed on the difference her success made to her lifestyle. And her lifestyle was one of constant travel.

The heading of Chapter 1 is - "Philadelphia Childhood". The second chapter heading shows a move from her own home to the grandmother's home, more or less as a poor dependent relative. It is a coming down in life- Chapter 2-"Life at Grandmother's". The seventh chapter heading states one of the first great achievements in Marian Anderson's life but again a shifting- Chapter 7 - "A Home of Our Own". Chapter 11 -"First Trip to Europe"; Chapter 12 - "Back to Europe"; Chapter 13 - "Scandinavia"; Chapter 14 -"Beyond Scandinavia"; Chapter 15 -"Home Again"; Chapter 16 -"Russia"; Chapter 20- "On the Road".

So, though on the whole, My Lord, What a Morning gives a fairly good impression of an autobiography that is linear and chronological and sticks to the important theme of the making of a Black singer named Marian Anderson, by the end of it the reader suddenly realises that the Self of the author is still unrevealed. However, unlike the autobiographies of other women entertainers, this evasion does not seem to be deliberate. This silence about the inner workings of Marian Anderson's mind fits in fact with her philosophy in life: "One has to be true to one's nature." The book is in
essence true to the nature of Marian Anderson. It is a diplomatic, non-combative, systematic chronicling of the rise of a girl from a poor Black family to a famous singer of the United States. The autobiography does not possess the diffusion, fragmentation and complication of narration that many women's autobiographies possess.

A major reason for this may be the important role played by Mr. Taubman in the final fashioning of the book. Another reason could lie in the fact that Marian Anderson did not lead the life of a typical woman. Typical women born in her class would have trod the typical road of childhood, schooling, adolescence, petty jobs, courtship, marriage, children and comfortable, if passive, domesticity. But Marian Anderson's life assumed a different pattern from childhood itself. The early death of her father brought great emotional and financial strain upon her mother who was left to bring up three daughters single-handed. Marian Anderson being the eldest felt it her duty to help her mother in contributing to the family. Her unquestioned musical talent contributed in adding to the family kitty. In fact, the poverty at home and her mother's struggle were very important factors in making Marian Anderson determined to succeed in her musical career. The hardships at home acted as spurs to the latent ambitious streak in Marian Anderson. Her willingness to work
hard on her God-given talent brought her to the position she later commanded in life. So, at a very early age Marian Anderson became the main bread-winner of the family and assumed the masculine position of the Head of the House: "I had never been asked or coerced to feel a sense of responsibility for the family, but, being the eldest, I knew that I should help as much as possible and was glad that I could. As my earnings increased, our situation at home had improved." (79)

The eldest child is psychologically supposed to have a self-sustaining ego system, and Anderson too was no exception to this. Her strong motivation to succeed in her musical career rose from the twin desire to eradicate her family's poverty and free her mother from the fearful pressure of a relentlessly grinding job. She holds her mother in very high esteem: "A great deal of what I am and what I achieved I owe to her." (92) In the chapter titled "Mother", Marian Anderson talks about the people who influenced her in her formative years and almost all of them are women. This strong sisterhood comprised her mother, her grandmother, her sisters, her aunt, and her teachers. The male figures are either weak or ineffectual. Marian Anderson reversed the patriarchal mode and assumed the responsibility of her family at an early age. In the absence of a father figure in the family she became the de-facto head of the family. Her
mother too became her responsibility: "Mother feels especially blessed that the family holds closely together and that it does so because it wants to. We owe this blessing, and many others, to her whom I call 'my little girl' ".(99)

Julia Kristeva, the French feminist, has delineated two different options for women: mother identification, which will intensify the pre-Oedipal components of the woman's psyche and render her marginal to the symbolic order or father-identification which will create a woman who will derive her identity from the symbolic order. ²

Marian Anderson identifies strongly with the phallocentric status quo. The apologetic tone of "Easter Sunday" reveals clearly Marian Anderson's unhappiness on being projected as a "symbol" of her people. She is, she states repeatedly, a "reluctant symbol". She is temperamentally unsuited by nature, she claims, to be a champion of the Civil Rights Movement or for that matter the Women's Movement. Both are struggles against a centralised power structure and Anderson has assumed by now the role of a pseudo-man and has reaped the benefits of being part of a deeply entrenched patriarchal set-up.

So, although Marian Anderson has a strong female influence in her mother and other relatives and teachers which work as a
delicate network of conventions, she is too pragmatic about the workings of the market-place vis-à-vis her music to highlight her "different-ness" either as a Woman or as a Black. She knew she has the ability to compete with the best in open competition. She has, in addition, the ambitious streak that her autobiography is so careful about concealing. These two together can make her part of the Establishment. Marian Anderson has no wish to remain on the margins. Her approach in life was therefore always conciliatory, non-combative, partly due to the teachings of the Church and partly due to the prudent advice of her mother. The tone of her autobiography reflects this approach. In that respect it is not a feminist text at all. Marian Anderson does not wish to be part of any movement that would push her away from the centre, be it feminism or equality in racial matters. My Lord, What a Morning is faithful to this cautious, non-combative nature of its author.
NOTES

1  Marian Anderson, My Lord, What a Morning (New York: The Viking Press, 1956) 183. All quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers are given in the body of the text.