EXISTENTIALISM

To be human is to make decisions and to act in a world full of misery and heartbreak. Maturity comes about only as a result of experience, and experience always involves suffering. . . . [Allan Chavkin, “The Problem of Suffering in American Fiction”, comparative Literature Studies, xxi, (Summer 1984), 162].

The Blacks particularly the Back women are the suffering and struggling individuals. They pass through anxieties and tension - - Angst - - and experience stresses and strains - - Sturm-und-Drang and confront several hardships. Their life gets reduced to one of endless suffering. They experience continual struggle against forces of which in the case of some they are ignorant of their cause and effect factors, and in the case of others they are helplessly tossed about. They suffer from fear psychosis as to their present and their future.

The environment, over which they have absolutely no control, controls them. As such to better appreciate the Black men and Black women as the suffering and struggling selves, it is imperative to have knowledge of what existentialism stands for and what is meant by naturalism.

To begin with existentialism is a philosophy and a cultural impulse, with roots in Biblical thought and ancient Socratic concept. Existentialism embraces a variety of styles and convictions. However, its one constant characteristic, as indicated by the origin of the word, is concern for human existence, especially for the affirmation of freedom and the refusal to subordinate personal awareness to abstract concepts or dehumanizing social structures.
It represents rebellion against established ideas and institutions that inhibit personal freedom and negate responsibility. The equivalent term for existentialism is found in German *Existenzialismus* and in French *L'existentialisme*.

Soren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian, was the founder of modern existentialism. It is true that he had a host of forerunners and that the entire romantic movement of his century shared in the protest against the dominant rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Yet it was Kierkegaard who established the concepts and vocabulary that influenced subsequent existentialists. He criticized reigning philosophies for their abstract speculations and their pretensions to answer grand questions without even asking the immediate questions of self-understanding.

Truth is subjectivity is the argument of Kierkegaard. He means that truth is meaningful only as it applies to a personal subject. In his understanding of existence, Kierkegaard emphasized the dizziness of freedom as man decides his destiny and the anxiety of the contingent being who can find no meaning in the universe except as he makes a *Leap of Faith*.

At this juncture it is necessary to examine the distinguishing properties of the concept of existentialism. The theist existentialist headed by Soren Kierkegaard and the atheist existentialists headed by Jean-Paul Sartre are of the view that mams first existentialist condition is his singleness and aloneness of life. Man is alone in the Universe. He has the will to choose. He chooses and regrets the choices made.
Man suffers from *Angst* - anxieties and tensions. He dreads death. But he appreciates the fact that death is inevitable. He is unable to find answers to the mysteries, doubts, doubts, irresolvable, unanswerables, indeterminacies, and uncertainties. He is naturally filled with nausea. In sheer struggle he finds the meaning and substance of existence. He realizes that he cannot jump any situation. He becomes aware of the fact that suicide is no answer to the problems, plights and predicaments faced by humanity.

And the atheist existentialists hold on to the view that life begins in void and ends in void. This idea is dramatically projected by Samuel Becket who persuasively opens his archetypal play of the Theatre of the Absurd, *Waiting for Godot*, with the loaded term, *Nothing*, and ends the play with same loaded term, *Nothing*, to demonstrate the validity of Jean-Paul Sartre’s thesis in his classic work, *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre presents his argument thus [*Being and Nothingness*, 1966, pp. 57-58]:

The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world must nihilate Nothingness in its Being, and even so it still runs the risk of still establishing Nothingness as a transcendent in the very heart of immanence unless it nihilates *Nothingness* in its being *in connection with its own being*. . . .

The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world is a being such that in its Being, the Nothingness of its Being is in question. *The Being*
by which Nothingness comes to the world must be its own Nothingness

[Italics as in the Original]. . .

If the atheist existentialists maintain that existence originates and culminates in Nothingness and that negativities and negations mark life, the theist existentialists believe that existence begins in Essence and finally merges with that Essence. They find, therefore, meaning, substance, significance, relevance, and consequence in living by a leap of faith, and valuing inter-subjectivity, and practicing, in letter and spirit, the Christian concept of love.

Existentialism is concerned with human existence in its concrete reality. Existentialism as a literary movement and philosophy places the entire emphasis on the existence of the individual, an existence that postulates man as free from any natural or human standard in terms of which he must act. The existentialist creates his world of experience through a choice of alternatives, a choice, which makes him free from all other men, but a choice, which enslaves him to his own doubts, and uncertainties, and to the consequences of his own choices. He has a consciousness, which considers what his choice has done to others.

The crisis of modern man is unique in its intensity through which one comes into contact with reality. Crisis is the way of life for the existentialists. And crisis comes with each experience, for there is always that moment when the decision either to make a choice or not to make a choice brings agony, Angst, and despair.

For Kierkegaard to think in existence is to recognize that one is faced with personal choices. One finds oneself constantly in an existential situation. For this
reason, ones thinking ought to deal with the problems of alternate choices. Subjectivity is what makes up each person’s unique existence.

In fine, the philosophy of existentialism is concerned with human existence. Webster’s definition of existentialism is worth recoding in this context [Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1983, p. 435]:

[Existentialism is] chiefly a twentieth century philosophic movement embracing diverse doctrines but centering an analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who may assume ultimate responsibility for his acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad. . . .

On the literary side, Existentialism as a philosophic movement was considered to be the principal expression by a group of writers who wrote during and after the last Global War, as Celine, Malrux, and Camus in France, Moraria, Rensi, and Vittorini in Italy, Kafka, Jaspers, Heidegger and Jung in Germany, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck in America.

Apart from these writers, many religious thinkers like Paul Tillich, Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Rudolff Buttmann, Helmut Thielicke, Stephen Neil, and Martin Buber acknowledged the impact of existentialism and convinced themselves thus [The Encyclopedia Americana, x, p. 763]:

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. . . that neither authority nor rational argument can take the place of commitment or ultimate concern [Paul Tillich’s phrase] as a condition for religious understanding. . . .

In this regard Paul Roubiczek offers a pertinent remark, which is worth quoting here [Existentialism For and Against, 1964, p. 6]:

. . . we may believe that everything is meaningless - - nevertheless the quest for meaning remains an essential part of our apparently meaningless life. . . .

In this connection, Kierkegaard insists that one should have knowledge of one’s self by directing one’s mind inward and by analyzing the situations in which one exists.

Gabriel Marcel discusses the relationship between the external and internal life thus [Homo Viator, 1962, p. 78]:

. . . the more one strives to understand the meaning of existence, the more surely one is led to the conclusion that the outward is also the inward, or rather to the realization that this distinction has no meaning where the actual growth of a being is involved. . .

It is of interest to read this statement of Gabriel Marcel in conjunction with that of Stephen Neil, which runs thus [Christian Faith and Other Faiths, 1966, p. 786]:

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The man who has chosen authentic existence is related to his own self in a new way. . . .

According to Heidegger man is confronted with two possibilities of existence, which are characterized as authentic and unauthentic. The man who lives an unauthentic existence does not make any deliberate decision for his life, and he goes on living with the crowd in an oblivious state of himself.

Most of the Christian existentialists condemn this kind of unauthentic existence. Stephen Neil makes a pointed observation, which is worth recording here [Christian Faith and Other Faiths, 1966, p. 184]:

The reality of existence is to be found only in choice, in decision, in the deliberate acceptance of the authentic and rejection of the unauthentic existence. . . .

According to Kierkegaard, eternal happiness is not a static conception. It is not a goal attained once and for all. It consists in living in the now and her. A miniature imagistic masterpiece of Edward Estlin Cummings makes the point quite clear. The poem makes interesting reading and it runs as follows [Complete Poems: 1913-1962, 1972, p. 781]:

now is a ship
which captain am
sails out of sleep
steering for dream. . . .
Moreover, man is endowed with freedom. So he is responsible for his actions whether they are good or bad. And every individual is emotionally impelled to act. He is pushed to act, and he wills to act. After choosing everything according to his desires, he regrets. Life then becomes a series of regrets. The intellectual understands that in his existential situation, the freedom that he enjoys is never compatible with comfort.

Suffering and struggle form part and parcel of the life of a man in his existence. In fact, in struggle is existence. And man is filled with nausea when he is not able to probe beyond the mysteries as it happens to Bartleby, the Scrivener the protagonist of Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*.

Man is afflicted by fear of destiny, and is filled with anxiety at the dreadful possibilities of life and the dread of death. In fact, it is the environment that has an iron grip over the Black men and Black women and control and determine their life. To appreciate this aspect of their life it becomes imperative to have the theoretical knowledge concerning Naturalism, at this juncture.

Naturalism, in philosophy, is a belief that nature represents all that can be known of reality and that the scientific method is the only means of determining the truth.

Rather than being a rigid philosophical system, naturalism has been described as a particular way or method of approaching philosophical problems and as certain set of conclusions arrived at as answers to these problems and as a certain set of conclusions arrived at as answers to these problems.
Naturalism denies the existence of the supernatural anywhere in the universe and holds that if any non-natural entities exist they may be known only by their observable influence on natural objects. Many naturalists describe their beliefs not as a theory of the nature of reality but as specific temper of mind — namely, a confidence in the empirical, experimental, or scientific method as the man and the world. They reject faith, revelation, authority, tradition, deductive reasoning, and intuition as sources of truth and guidance.

All meaning originates in experience, and all beliefs must be tested by experience in accordance with the general canons of scientific method. In general, naturalism is opposed to the characteristic doctrines of religion, supernaturalism, and idealism.

The main tenets that are ascribed to naturalism are the following:

1. Every taste of the world or event in it can be explained causally or mechanically by reference to previous states or events or else in the result of chance.

2. No god or other supernatural being is necessary to explain the world. The natural world of objects and events in space and time is all that is real.

3. Man is wholly a part of this natural world, and he is only an incidental product of the world process.

4. There are no absolute values or transcendental norms, known in no-empirical ways. All values and norms are in some sense a function of human attitudes, needs and satisfactions.
Parallels are drawn between naturalism and other systems such as empiricism, materialism, determinism, and pragmatism. All share to some extent a belief in the natural order and in experimental science.

Naturalism differs from the others in its disavowal of traditional philosophy, believing that human problems can be solved through critical intelligence. Naturalism is traced back to British empiricism, and other European doctrines, but it came to flower in the United in the 1930s and 1940s following the pioneering efforts of George Santayana and John Dewey and Dewey’s disciples.

Like Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, *Sister Carrie* the Black men and Black women wallow in mud and mire and suffer the excruciating circumstances of ignorance and poverty and suffer tragedy because of their environment. They are not able to create a second environment as recommended by Bellow.

Moreover, suffering gives rise to a genuine sense of self and promotes self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-discovery. The pity of it is that the Black by his Blackness and his race remains outside the social compact of the society where he lives, but ironically is existentially right in the middle of the social drama. The Black intellectuals advice the Blacks to appreciate the truth that self-discovery comes from suffering. There is no meaning in accepting failure and defeat and harbouring a sense of doom and annihilation. The Blacks must rise above suffering and build a self-identity.

The suffering Black does not surrender to despair. He does not allow himself to be crushed by suffering, which is an existential inevitability. He uses this
experience of suffering to gain nobility of character and turn humanistic. In fact, one learns to be a compassionating soul embracing humanistic concerns of love, kindness, goodness and mercy. The point that is made here is that suffering promotes humanism in the sufferer. After all what is against the credit of the individual is how he gives credit to the other as a human being.

Getting a place to live in a White dominated area is so very difficult and a painful experience for the Blacks. Maya Angelou also passes through a great deal of suffering though she had the money to defray her rent all because she a Black woman and the landlord was a White man. This kind of suffering is a common feature in the lives of the Blacks. In her autobiographical work, The Heart of a Woman she records such a painful experience in extenso thus [The Heart of a Woman, 1981, p. 5]:

The few Black people who lived in Laurel Canyon, including Billy Eckstein, Billy Daniels, and Herb Jeffries, were rich, famous and light-skinned enough to pass, at least for Portuguese. I [Maya Angelou], on the other hand, was a little known nightclub singer who was said to have more determination than talent. I wanted desperately to live in the glamorous surroundings. I accepted as fictitious the tales of amateurs being discovered at lunch counters, yet I did believe it was important to be in the right place at the right time, and no place seemed so right to me in 1958, as Laurel Canyon. . . . When I answered a “For Rent” ad, the landlord told me the house had been taken that very morning. I asked Atara and Joe Morheim, a sympathetic White couple, to try to rent the house for me. They succeeded in doing so. On moving day, the
Morheims, Frederick “Wilkie” Wilkerson, my friend and voice coach, Guy, and I appeared on the steps of a modest, overpriced two-bedroom bungalow. The landlord shook hands with Joe, welcomed him, then looked over Joe’s shoulder and recognized me. *Shock and revulsion made him recoil. He snatched his hand away from Joe. “You bastard, I know what you’re doing. I ought to sue you.”* Joe, who always seemed casual to the point of being totally disinterested, surprised me with his emotional response. “You fascist, you’d better not mention suing anybody. This lady here should sue you. If she wants to, I’ll testify in court for her. Now get the hell out of the way so we can move in.” The landlord brushed past us, throwing his anger into the perfumed air. “I should have known. You [meaning Joe] dirty Jew. You bastard, you.”

The landlord poured his wrath against Joe for forcing to let his two bedroom bungalow for rent to a Black woman and her Black son. This textual passage quoted at length from *The Heart of a Woman* is indicative of the fact that for a Black to get a house on rent in a White populated area was a difficulty in America of the sixties of the twentieth century because of the racist attitude of the Whites. Maya Angelou records her meeting with the famous Billie Holiday.

Maya Angelou points out that the suffering of Billie Holiday are manifold, to begin with she suffers from colour bar. The Whites look her down upon because of her Black skin. Consequentially she suffers being alienated from the Whites. Above
all as the Black woman she suffers the slings and arrows at the hands of men, particularly the Black men.

Maya Angelou reads Billie Holiday as the suffering self. The dialogue between Maya Angelou and Billie Holiday argues to the point how men exploit, and despoil women, and how they subject women to physical torture thus [The Heart of a Woman, 1981, pp. 10-11]:

Finally she [Billie Holiday] asked, “You a square, ain’t you?”


“Then how come you invited me to your house?” . . .

“Because you are a great artist and I respect you.”

“Bullshit. You just wanted to see what I looked like, up close.” She interrupted my denial. “That’s all right. That don’t hurt my feelings. You see me now, though, you ain’t seeing nothing. I used to be a bitch on wheels. Lot of folks thought I was pretty. Anyway that’s what they said. “’Course, you know how folks [men] talk. They’ll tell you anything to get what they want. ‘Course, there are them that’ll strong-arm [physically assault] you and take it. I know a lot of them, too. . . Men. Men can really do it to you.” . . .

I [Maya Angelou] had heard stories of Billie being beaten by men, cheated by drug pushers and hounded by narcotics agents, still I thought she was the paranoid person I had ever met. . . .

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Billie Holiday’s observation of the nature and conduct of men be they Black or White, gains universal significance and implications. Her observation is related to the conduct and nature of Black men towards the Black women.

If the Black men fail in their professions and experience defeats, failures and frustrations they direct the wrath on their helpless Black women for all their defeats, failures and frustrations. Ultimately it is the Black women that suffer if their men meet with failures and lack of success in their life. The passage runs thus [The Heart of a Woman, 1981, p. 12]:

Black men in . . . business is bad news. When they [Black men] can’t get as far as they deserve, they start taking it out on their women [My Emphasis]. . .

Billie Holiday is a suffering self. If Billie Holiday has turned into a paranoid, and flings abuses and pours venom at the men, whether they are Black or White, it is all because of the harassment and sufferings that has suffered at the hands of men. Maya Angelou delineates this aspect of Billie Holiday’s character thus [The Heart of a Woman, 1981, pp. 10-11]:

Billie Holiday’s language was a mixture of mockery and vulgarity that caught me [Maya Angelou] without warning. Although she used the old common words, they were in new arrangements, and spoken in that casual tone, which seemed to drag itself, rasping, across the ears. . .
Maya Angelou points out that the conditions of life and living standards of the suffering Blacks are the same for them everywhere in America [The Heart of a Woman, 1981, p. 21]:

In 1959, Fresno was a middling town with palm trees and a decidedly Southern accent. Most of its White inhabitants seemed to be descendants of Steinbeck’s Joads, and its Black citizens were farm hands who had simply exchanged the dirt roads of Arkansas and Mississippi for the dusty streets of Central California. . .

Vivian Baxter, the mother of Maya Angelou, points out to Maya Angelou that it is a pity that the suffering Blacks give in to fear psychosis. She argues thus [The Heart of a Woman, 1981, p. 27]:

Animals can sense for fear. They feel it. Well, you know that human beings are animals, too. Never, never let a person know you’re frightened. And a group of them . . . absolutely never. Fear brings out the worst thing in everybody. Now, in that lobby you [Maya Angelou] were as scared as a rabbit. I knew it and all those White folks knew it. If I hadn’t been there, they might have turned into a mob. But something about me [Vivian Baxter] told them [White folks], if they mess with either of us, they’d better start looking for some new asses, ‘cause I’d blow away what their mammas gave them. . . .

The candid advice of Maya Angelou’s mother is that the suffering Blacks should shed their fear psychosis. The irony of the fact that the black bellboy feels
shocked and surprised to see his own brethren in the White frequented places such as restaurants and theatres. This is defeatist attitude of the exploited, degraded, dehumanized, suffering, Blacks.

It ought to be stressed that defeatism is the offshoot of despair and suffering. But it is not defeatism but the strength and perseverance to prevail over all circumstances and succeed in life that is required. Moreover, the defeatist suffers the loss of identity. A striking poem of Edward Estlin Cummings is an eye-opener to all defeatists particularly the Blacks to shed defeatism to make a life of their own. The poem makes interesting reading, and hence it is quoted in full below: [Complete Poems, 1972, p. 338]:

in a middle of a room
stands a suicide
sniffing a Paper rose
smiling to a self
“somewhere it is spring and sometimes
people are in real; imagine
somewhere real flowers, but
I can’t imagine real flowers for if I
could they would somehow
not be real”
(so he smiles
smiling) “but I will not
everywhere be real to
you in moment”
This is blond
with small hands

“everything is easier
than I had guessed everything would
be; even remembering the way who
looked at whom first, anyhow dancing”

(a moon swims out of a cloud
a clock strikes midnight
a finger pulls a trigger
a bird flies into a mirror). . .

Without fear and with great determination and will power Vivian Baxter takes
her daughter Maya Angelou to Marine Cooks and Stewards Union and finds a room to
her liking to stay in. She orders for snacks and tea and the Black bellboy brings in the
tray with snacks and tea. He is surprised and shocked to see two Black women staying
in a White frequented place.

The way Vivian Baxter treats him the Black room boy points out how the
Blacks still are not prepared to accept that they are equals to the Whites and still many
suffering Blacks hold on to their inferiority complex. They fail to understand Leoplad
Senghor’s argument as contained in his definition of Negritude. Leoplad Senghor
maintains through Negritude that the Blacks and the Whites are born equal. The
Blacks are not inferior to the Whites and the Whites are not superior to the Blacks. Moreover, Lepald Senghor points out to the Blacks to take pride in their race and believe in their distinct identity and strike upward mobility through education and status. His solid observation that *Black is Beautiful.*

In such a context, Leoplad Senghor argues that the Blacks should not yield to inferiority complex. Therefore, the inferiority complex of the Black bellboy is to be shunned.

The passage makes interesting reading and hence it is quoted below [*The Heart of a Woman*, p. 28]:

“Because they [the Whites] told me [Vivian Baxter] Negro women couldn’t get in the union. You know what I told them?”

I [Maya Angelou] shook my head, although I really knew.

“I told them, ‘You want to bet?’ I’ll put my foot in that door up to my hip until women of every colour can walk over my foot, get in that union, get aboard a ship and go to sea.” There was a knock at the door. : Come in.”

A uniformed Black man opened the door and halted in surprise at seeing us.

“Good evening. Just put the tray over there. Thank you.”

The bellboy deposited the tray and turned.

“Good evening, you all surprised me. Sure did. Didn’t expect to see you. Sure didn’t.”
Mother walked toward him holding money in her hand. “Who did you expect? Queen Victoria?”


While talking of John’s mother Maya Angelou points out how the Blacks view the Whites as villains and the Blacks as courageous in the face of their struggles and their sufferings. The textual passage makes interesting reading and it is quoted below [The Heart of a Woman, p. 31]:

John’s mother, Mom Willie, who wore her Southern background like a magnolia corsage, eternal fresh, was robust, and in her sixties. She was one of the groups of Black men who had raised their children, worked hard, fought for her principles and still retained some humour. She often entranced the family with graphic stories set in a sullen, racist South. The tales changed, the plots varied, her villains were always White and her heroes up standing, courageous, clever Blacks. . . .

Maya Angelou graphically describes the mindset of the Blacks. Anger dominated the mind of the Blacks when they discussed the sufferings of the blacks. The textual passage makes interesting reading and it is quoted below [The Heart of a Woman, p. 32]:

Of course, in Arkansas, when I [Maya Angelou] was young, Black children knowing that Whites owned the cotton gin, the lumber mill, the fine houses and paved streets, had to find something which they thought Whites did not possess. This need to
have something all one’s own coincided with the burgeoning interest in sex. The children sang, beyond the ears of adults wistfully:

“Whites folks ain’t got the hole . . .
And they ain’t got the pole . . .
And they ain’t got the soul . . .
To do it right . . . real right . . . all night.” . . .

In the evening years in California the jokes came scarcer and the jobs grew meaner. Anger was always present whenever the subject of Whites entered our conversations. We discussed the treatment of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi, the large humiliations and the petty snubs e all knew were meant to maim our spirits. I had heard White folks ridiculed, cursed and envied, but I had never heard them dominate the entire intimate conversation of a Black family [My Emphasis]. . . .

Maya Angelou learns from John that the Blacks experience a life of suffering whether they live in New York, Detroit, San Francisco, Illinois, Ohio, Arkansas, Georgia, California, Dallas, Down South, Up South, West or East. The sufferings and struggles of the Blacks remain unchanged everywhere in America. The textual passage makes interesting reading and it is quoted below [The Heart of a Woman, p. 33]:

One evening after the rest of the family had gone to bed, I [Maya Angelou] sat up having a nightcap with John. I asked why he was so angry all the time. I told
him that while I agreed with Alabama Blacks who boycotted bus companies and protested against segregation, California Blacks were thousands of miles, literally and figuratively from those Southern plagues.

“Girl, don’t you believe it. Georgia is Down South. California is Up South. If you’re Black in this country, you’re on a plantation. You have to deal with masters. There might be some argument over whether they are vicious masters, but be assured that they all think that they are masters . . . And if they think that, then you’d better believe they think you are the slave. Maybe a smart slave, a pretty slave, a good slave, but a slave just the same.” . . .

If Our Lord God Jesus Christ is the first victim of mankind then the Blacks are next victims of mankind. And at it the Black women particularly the Black mothers are the worst sufferers and the greatest victims of mankind argues Maya Angelou.

Maya Angelou to a large extent right in her perception that the Black mothers pass through great anguish, mental torments and physical pain of all the peoples on the face of the earth. Maya Angelou describes the Black mother and it makes painful reading for the Black mother suffers the most and suffering and struggles constitute the essence of her existence. In fact she passes through this existential peril of suffering more than others. The textual passage makes painful reading and it is quoted below [The Heart of a Woman, pp. 36-37]:

The Black mother perceives destruction at every door, ruination at every door, ruination at every window, and even she herself is not
beyond her own suspicion. She questions whether she loves her children enough - - or more terribly, does she love them too much? Do her looks cause embarrassment - - or even more terrifying, is she so attractive her sons begin to desire her and her daughters begin to hate her. If she is unmarried, the challenges are increased. Her singleness [alienated state] indicates she is rejected, or has been rejected by her mate. Yet she is raising her children who will become mates. Beyond her door, all authority is in the hands of people who do not look or think or act like her and her children. Teachers, doctors, sales clerks, librarians, policemen, welfare workers are White and exact control over her family’s moods, conditions, and personality; yet within the home, she must display a right to rule, which at any moment, by a knock at the door, or a ring of the telephone can be exposed as false. In the face of these contradictions, she must provide a blanket of stability, which warms but does not suffocate, and she must tell her children the truth about the power of White power, without suggesting that it cannot be challenged [My Emphasis]. . . .

Maya Angelou defines Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., as the one Black leader who had the right perception of the Blacks. It was Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who visualized that change of the unchangeable in America is inevitable and the day would dawn when all the sufferings of the Blacks, particularly that of the Black women, would draw to a close. His dream has come true with America making history by allowing the first Black, Mr. Barack Obama to be their forty-third President of the United States of America. He describes the appearance of Rev. Martin Luther
King, Jr., at the Harlem Church. The textual passage makes interesting reading and it is quoted below [The Heart of a Woman, pp. 55-56]:

The introduction was over and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., rose. The audience, collectively, lost its composure, pews scraped against the floor as people stood, rearing back, pushing, leaning forward shouting.

“Yes, Lord. Come on, Dr King. Just come on.” . . .

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., stood on the dais, away from the podium, allowing the audience full view of his body. He looked at the audience, smiling, accepting the adulation but strangely apart from it.

After a minute, he walked to a position behind the podium and raised both hands. It was at once a surrendering and a quelling gesture. The Church became quiet, but the people remained standing. They were trying to fill their eyes with the sight of the man. He smiled warmly and lowered his arms. The audience sat immediately, as if they had been attached by invisible strings to the ends of his fingers. He began to speak in a rich sonorous voice. He brought greetings from our brothers and sisters in Atlanta and in Montgomery, in Charlotte and Raleigh, in Jackson and Jacksonville.

A lot of you, he reminded us, are from the South and still have ties to the land. Somewhere there was an old grandmother holding on, a few uncles, some cousins and friends.

*There was a new South. A more violent and ugly South, a country where our white brothers and sisters were terrified of change,*
inevitable change. They would rather scratch up the land with bloody fingers and take their most precious document, the Declaration of Independence, and throw it in the deepest ocean, bury it under the highest mountain, or burn it in the most flagrant blaze, than admit justice into a seat at the welcome table, and fair-play room in a vacant inn [My Emphasis]. . . .

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., admirably and adequately argues that he Blacks are the victims and sufferers. He holds out hope to the suffering Blacks through his stirring speech. The textual passage makes interesting reading and it is quoted below [The Heart of a Woman, p. 56]:

We, the Black people, the most displaced, the poorest, the most maligned and scourged, we had the glorious task of reclaiming the soul and saving the honour of the country. We, the most hated, must take hate into our hands and by the miracle of love, turn loathing into love. We, the most feared and apprehensive, must take fear and by love, change it into hope. We, who die daily in large and small ways, must take the demon death and turn it into Life. . . .

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., holds in one scale the sufferings and pains of the Blacks and in the other scale places hope of the change of the unchangeable and encourages the Blacks that through Christ-like love they could negate the hatred, fear and death into one of Life. Like Langston Hughes who strongly recommends to the Blacks to hope for a brighter tomorrow, Maya Angelou argues that the Blacks must
hope for freedom from their sufferings and struggles. With faith in the Resurrected Christ the Blacks hope for change and a future free of all their sufferings.

Maya Angelou refers to her song in this regard and it is worth quoting here [The Heart of a Woman, pp 36-37]:

I [Maya Angelou]: explained, “If you believe you deserve freedom [from the stresses and the strains - - the Sturm-und-Drang - - anxieties and tensions - - Angst - - and anguish, and the sufferings and struggles] - - if you want it, if you believe it should be yours, you must sing;

“U hu uhuru oh yea freedom
U hu uhuru oh yea freedom
Uh huh Uh hum”
“O sawaba huru
O sawaba huu
O sawaba huru”

“Oh yea oh yea freedom
uh huh
uh hum
uh hum
uh hum”

“U huh uhuru oh yea freedom
uh huh uhuru oh yea freedom
uh huh uhuru oh yea freedom
uh huh, oh yea freedom.” . . .

Maya Angelou refers to the argument of redemptive suffering always voiced by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., which she has found very difficult to accept in the beginning but after mature thinking she accepts it as the right method of living and seeing a life of change of the unchangeable. The textual passage makes interesting reading and it is quoted below in extenso [The Heart of a Woman, p. 93]:

He [Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.] knew Texarkana and Pine Bluff, and, of course, Little Rock. He asked me the size and population of Stamps and if my people were farmers. I said no and started to explain about Mamma, and my crippled uncle who raised me. As I talked he nodded as if he knew them personally. When I described the dirt roads and shanties and the little schoolhouse on top of the hill, he smiled in recognition. When I mentioned my brother Bailey, he asked what he was doing now.

The question stopped me. He was friendly and understanding, but I told him my brother was in prison, I couldn’t be sure how long his understanding would last. I could lose my job. Even more important, I might lose his respect. Birds of a feather and all that, but I took a chance and told him Bailey was in Sing Sing.

He dropped his head and looked at his hands.

“It wasn’t a crime against a human being.” I had to explain. I loved my brother and although he was in jail, I wanted Rev. Martin Luther King,
Jr., to think he was an uncommon criminal. “He was a fence. Selling stolen goods. That’s all.”

He looked up. “How old is he?”

“Thirty-three and very bright. Bailey is not a bad person. Really.”

I [Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.] understand. Disappointment drives our young men to desperate lengths.” Sympathy and sadness kept his voice low. “That’s why we must fight and win. We must save the Baileys of the world. And Maya, never stop loving him. Never give up on him. Never deny him. And remember, he is freer than those who hold him behind bars.”

Maya Angelou never appreciated Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s redemptive argument to begin with, but as stated earlier she understand that it is the right way for the Blacks to see the light of redemption after all their sufferings in America. Maya Angelou understands Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., perfectly and well and quotes one of the strong assertions of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., which reads quite satisfactorily [The Heart of a Woman, p. 67]:

Truth dashed to earth shall rise again. . . .

This assertion is so every axiomatic and proves that Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s., dream come true. Maya Angelou points out that though the Blacks, particularly the Black women have been the sufferers, the Blacks have lived a life that is better and superior to that of the Whites. Her argument is three
phased and it is worth quoting here. Her argument in the first phase runs thus

[The Heart of a Woman, pp. 172-173]: . . .

Black people could never be like Whites. We were different. More respectful, more merciful, more spiritual. Whites irresponsibly sent their own aged parents to institutions to be cared for by strangers and to die alone. We generously kept old aunts and uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents at home, feeble but needed, senile but accepted as natural parts of natural families. . . .

Her argument in the second phase runs thus [The Heart of a Woman, pp. 172-173]:

Our mercy was well known. During the thirties Depression, White hobos left freight trains and look for Black neighbourhoods. They would appear hungry at the homes of the last hired and the first fired, and were never turned away. The migrants were given cold biscuits, leftover beans, grits and whatever Black folks could spare. For centuries we tended, and nursed, often at our breasts, the children of people who despised us. We had cooked the food of a nation of racists, and despite the many opportunities, there were few stories of Black servants poisoning White families. If that didn’t show mercy, then I [Maya Angelou] misunderstood the word. . . .

Her argument in the third phase runs thus [The Heart of a Woman, p. 173]:

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As for spirituality we [the Blacks] were Christian. We demonstrated the teachings of Christ. We turned other cheeks so often our heads to revolve on the end of our necks, like old stop-and-go signs. How many times should we forgive? Jesus said even times seventy. We forgive as if forgiving was our talent. Our Church music showed that we believed there was something greater than we, something beyond our physical selves, and that something, that God, and His Son, Jesus, were always present and could be called “in the midnight hour” and talked to when the “sun raised itself to walk across the morning sky.” We could sing the angels out of heaven and bring them to stand thousands thronged on the head of a pin. We could ask Jesus to be on hand to “walk around” our deathbeds and gather us into “the bosom of Abraham.” We told Him all about our sorrows and relished the time when we would be counted among the numbers of those who would go marching in. We would walk the golden streets of heaven eat of the milk and honey, wear the promised shoes and rest in the arms of Jesus, who would rock us and say, “You have laboured in my vineyard. You are tired. You are home now, Child. Well done.” Oh, there was no doubt that we were spiritual. . .

With this high note of hope Maya Angelou argues that there is a brighter future for the suffering Blacks.