



THE SIMMERING RACIAL MUTATION: A CRITIQUE OF MAYA ANGELOU'S I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

Mary EpsibaGnana* Dr. K. Ravichandran**

*Ph.D Research Scholar, Thiruvalluvar University Serkkadu, Vellore.

**Associate Professor of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Serkkadu, Vellore.

Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to explore her concern over racial, sexual and political issues, particularly black women's struggle for spiritual and political awareness. Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* emphasizes the racial prejudices just in the name of the black skin, and the emotions and fears that arise along with it. In this autobiography, she tells how the racists are turned against her and her society she belongs to. The life of Angelou is agonizingly painful and the humiliation and struggles resulting from the racism and sexism reveal her mental anguish to others. A glance of black history and the survey of paths she has crossed since her childhood days as a slave-woman unfold horror and disgust. Angelou recounts; how difficult for the working African Americans to survive in an economically depressed and racially oppressed community. This autobiography is an epitome of a kaleidoscope through which one could understand the pitiable life story of a young black girl, the history of America, and the elements of racial protest and sexism, and other disruptive forces. Thus Angelou through her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* brings out the existential predicament of African American women, the black community, and her own trials and tribulations of her life which is perplexed with both racial and gender adversities.

Key Words: Racism, Sexism, Sociological discourse, Autobiographical Elements, Psychological Conflict.

Maya Angelou is a representative African American woman writer. Her works consistently reflect her concern over racial, sexual and political issues, particularly with the black women's struggle for spiritual and political awareness. Her Southern heritage and her sense of the culture and history of her people form the core of her autobiography. Viewing the African American woman as symbol representing hope and resurrection for humanity, Angelou stresses the importance of bonds between women as means to contend with racism and sexism. Her writings, ever since her pronouncement on women, have been considered as the representative voice of the oppressed women in America and everywhere, where the poor Africans are discriminated for being born as black. The society tends to forget that she is a part of America, which has been ascertained as the home of democracy that assures all its citizens Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. In this context Martin Luther King says:

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. (81)

The mission of Angelou's autobiography is to show how society violated her as a young African American female. When she was at the age of three, her parents got divorced and sent Angelou and her brother Bailey from California to Arkansas on a train with tags on their wrist. They were brought up by their stoic grandmother and then sent back to their carefree mother. At the age of eight, she was raped by her mother's live-in-partner. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* clearly conveys the physical pain of the sexual assault; guilt and shame of rape made her not to reveal her mental anguish to others. Her timidity and fear of telling signify the brutality of the rape. For more than a year after the incident, she lived with an self-imposed silence, and spoke very rarely.

Maya Angelou's *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* expresses the hardships of the growing up of a black woman during the period of racism and hatred. In this autobiography, she tells how the racists are turned against her and her family. To be a black girl is awfully tragic in the white racist society. Angelou brings out the narrative of her very young days with stories that depict the humiliation and struggles resulting from the racism which is prevalent. Angelou recounts; how difficult for the working African Americans to survive in an economically depressed and racially oppressed community. Maya Angelou struggled by both racial and gender adversities.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings focuses on the concept of the black skin, and the emotions and fears that come along with it. Maya's life was excruciatingly painful filled with pangs and agonies. Since her birth, Maya Angelou was subjected to racism, rape, grief and dehumanization. She could bear enough emotional stress, in her life time that most people never experience in their lifetime. Yet, she survived. She was determined herself to become stronger, and in doing so, she produced writings which helped others to become strong. Her experiences and the lessons she learned gave her confidence to serve as a teacher, preacher, and a source of inspiration to millions.



There are a number of episodes in which Maya and Momma Henderson disagree with the white folks and their treatments. The most dramatic scene is the rural white girls who stand in front of Momma's store and taunt her, like the three witches in Macbeth. One of the "powhitetrash" girls brazenly exposes her private parts to the God-fearing Momma. Symbolically the adolescent is exhibiting her white sexuality before Annie Henderson, a black woman and store owner, who is unable to respond except through passively humming spiritual hymns. Maya is furious at her grandmother's compliance and she believes that she can blow away the problem with a powerful rifle.

Maya confronts the insidious effect of racism and segregation in America at her very young age. She internalizes the idea that blonde hair is beautiful and that she is far black girl trapped in a nightmare. Stamps, in Arkansas, are so thoroughly segregated that as a child Maya Angelou is not ready to believe the white people even for petty matters. As Maya gets older, she confronted more overt and personal incidents of racism, such as a white speaker's condescending address at her, Mary, and a white dentist's refusal to treat her. The importance of Joe Louis' world championship boxing match to the black community reveals the dearth of publicly recognized African- American heroes. It also demonstrates the desperate nature of the black community's hope for vindication through the athletic triumph of one man.

Born at a crucial time in the American history, young Maya struggled for acceptance both as a black and as a woman. Fortunately for her, she has the determination to see both struggles through to the end. Selwyn R. Cudjoe comments that Angelou's autobiographies rescue not only her personal history, but also the collective history of all the black women:

The autobiography, therefore, is objective and realistic in its approach and is presumed generally to be of service to the group. It is never meant to glorify the exploits of the individual, and the concerns of the collective predominate. One's personal experiences are presumed to be an authentic expression of the society, and thus statistical evidences and sociological treatises assume a secondary level of importance. Herein can be found the importance of the autobiographical statement in Afro- American letters. (10)

Once Maya suffered from toothache; then she was taken to a dentist by Momma. They approached Dr. Lincoln, a white dentist in the town. During the great Depression, Momma loaned money to him, by which he developed his clinic. But they were shocked, when he stated that he never treated the black patients. The dentist says: "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (184). This makes Momma angry and she asks for the interest on the loan, which was already given to him by her. Then, Momma takes Maya to a black dentist in Texarkana.

Maya at her young age, tried to relate the boxing match of Louis and the white boxer with that of her community's fight against the whole white community. Maya along with several other people of her race was keenly observing the boxing match. The importance of Joe Louis' world championship boxing match to the black community reveals the dearth of publicly recognized African-American heroes. At one point, the announcer of the boxing match said that Louis was in the corner taking a beating. Maya felt that it was very bad of him and a serious insult to her community. She writes:

My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching. Yet another Black man hanging on a tree... This might be the end of the world. If Joe lost, we were back in slavery beyond help. It would all be true, the accusation that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than the apes. (131)

It also demonstrates the desperate nature of the black community's hope for vindication through an athletic triumph of one man. Louis' loss would mean the "fall" of the race and the white return to the idea that they have rights to denigrate the black people. Cynics might say that Louis' win does little than to stave off the black community's psychological despair. It does not turn the tables on the whites because there is no denying that the whites still hold all the power. Racism plays many psychological games with the blacks and the whites; and perhaps the Louis' public recognition helps to teach both the whites and the blacks to accept that the African- Americans are equals to the whites. This fight determined how the blacks were looked at from then on. If Louis had lost, the blacks would be still treated of as lower than the whites.

Another instance of the racial protest in *Caged Bird* is Angelou's struggle to find equal opportunity in the working field. The Whites did not allow colored people to work on the streetcars and Maya wanted to do a job as a conductorette at the Market Street Railway Company. Not only Angelou fights for equal rights to do a job but also battle against racism. With this defying movement in her life, Marguerite takes all that she has learned from the community of women and synergies this knowledge to get the job she wants. She makes an effort to use her education, self-knowledge, self-esteem, self-identity, and racism placed before her from the white dominated patriarchal society.



The Market Street Railway Company had an opening for a conductorette, and Marguerite decides to apply for the position, when her mother gets upset with her skipping the school. When Marguerite goes to apply for the job, she meets a lot of resistance from the secretary in the hiring manager's office. Marguerite is after all a black; and the secretary, with the Southern accent is a white. This miserable little encounter had nothing to do with her anymore than it had to do with that silly clerk. The incident was a recurring dream, concocted years before by stupid whites and it eternally came back to haunt us all:

The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes in the final scene, where, because of harm done by one ancestor to another we were, bound to duel to the death. Also because the play must end somewhere....Her Southern nasal accent sliced my meditation and I looked deep into my thoughts. All lies, all comfortable lies. The receptionist was not innocent and neither was I. the whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white. (260).

Maya's mind raced with different thoughts on how to handle this situation. If Marguerite wants the job she has to be persistent with her efforts. She engages the Negro organizations to help her out with this problem, but most of them turned her down. The Negro organizations, which are run by men, did not understand why Marguerite wanted this particular job when there were so many factory jobs available due to the war and they were reluctant to help her.

Though Marguerite was angry that the management team at the railway office was snubbing her and her own community did not support her efforts, Marguerite did not let her anger overcome her rational thought. However, she would not take now for an answer and pursued the job anyway. "I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BE A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHANGER ROM MY BELT.I WOULD" (260)Maya goes on to get the job and be the first black woman conductor on the San Francisco Trolley. Angelou's autobiographies show a symbiotic relationship between the self and the cultural environment. Through her episodic recreation of individuals, family and community displacement as objective experiences of racial oppression, her writings illustrate the consequences of racial persecution in contemporary American society. In this regard Dolly A. McPherson remarks:

A study of the work of Maya Angelou, autobiographer and poet, shows how the writer uses autobiography to define her quest for human individuality, identifying her personal struggle with the general condition of Black Americans and claiming a representative role not only in relation to Black Americans, but also in relation to the idea of America. Thus, through a study her work, one gains a closer access to American cultural history. (5).

The autobiography seems to be like a kaleidoscope; and looking through it one could discern the life story of a young black girl, the history of America, and the elements of racial protest and sexism, and other disruptive forces. There lies the success of the author who showcases her talents and discusses a variety of themes through a piece of art. In that aspect, the autobiography is a sublime creation which brings about a mosaic of themes and ideas.

As a black American woman, Maya comes from a long tradition of female independence and responsibilities. Slavery never allowed her to feel ease at domesticity among the slave women who work in the plantation. Rose first by Momma, a daughter of ex-slave, and a self-sufficient business woman and mother, Angelou gives birth to her son Guy while living with her biological mother Vivian, a self-sufficient entrepreneur in her own right. In both homes, there is no male earning member in the traditional sense. Momma is widowed and Vivian is divorced. Even if there was, the women would still have to work to add to the often meager wages that internal colonialism ensured the black men earned. In short, Maya herself has been raised by two single mothers who have always worked to find their livelihood for their families.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the first of Maya Angelou's autobiographies. It covers her life from the age of three, when her parents send her and her brother Bailey to live with their parental grandmother, Annie Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas, until the age of sixteen, when she becomes a mother. The author describes the situation in her childhood as:

When I was three and Bailey four, we had arrived in the musty little town wearing tags on our wrists which instructed- "To Whom It May Concern" –that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson Jr., from Long Beach, California, en route to Stamps, Arkansas, c/o Mrs. Annie Henderson. (6)

Maya encounters a series of problems since her childhood. When the porter abandons the children the next day in Arizona, the two young children make the rest of the trip to Stamps with pieces of paper tacked on their bodies listing their final destination. Mrs. Henderson, whom the children soon begin to call Momma, is the main influence on her childhood. She becomes Maya's mother rather than her biological mother, Vivian Baxter. Yolanda M. Manora comments on I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings as:



It is most significant that the emblematic scenes of convergence reveal the voices of the woman dissolving into one another. It is this coalescence that gives Maya her voice. Momma, Vivian, and Mrs. Flowers flow into each other and in turn, into Maya. (373)

Momma raises them for most of their childhood. She owns the only store in the Black section of Stamps, Arkansas, and it serves as the central gathering place for the Black community. She raises the children according to stern Christian values and strict rules. Though she never reacts with emotion, the children realize her love anyway. Vivian Baxter lives according to her own rules, redefining traditional views of maternity, and at times violating the accepted morality. She makes her living as games-woman in joints, working into the early hours of the morning and beyond and lies with men to whom she is not married.

Mrs. Bertha Flowers a black aristocrat living in Stamps, Arkansas, becomes the first person to prod Maya out of her silence after Maya's rape; taking an interest in Maya and making her feel a special girl. Maya respects Mrs. Flowers mainly for she encourages her love of literature. All the three women, Momma, Vivian and Mrs. Flowers have played the role of mother in some way. Although Maya has a mother, she portrays all the three adult women as her mothers in her life. Angelou's portrayal does not pose an image of the black woman as mother; but shows these disparate Black women, Momma, Vivian and Mrs. Flowers, all engaged in motherhood. She is nurtured by all the three women and every one of them greatly influences her emerging as a black mother among the White. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* ends when Maya becomes a mother. The hybridized mother of Momma, Vivian, and Mrs. Flowers helped her to mother her own child. The author presents the condition when she becomes a mother as follows:

She turned the light on and said, "Look at the baby". My fears were so powerful I couldn't move to look at the center of the bed. She said again, "Look at the baby". I didn't hear sadness in her voice, and that helped me to break the bonds of terror. The baby was no longer in the center of the bed. At first I thought he had moved. But after closer investigation I found that I was lying on my stomach with arm bent at a right angle. Under the tent of blanket, which was poled by my elbow and forearm, the baby slept touching my side. (281)

At the end of the narrative, Maya returns to her mother, Vivian Baxter. She is able to draw from Vivian Baxter the strength and support she needs as she prepares to have a baby *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which begins with the separation of mother and daughter, ends in their reunion. The mother, daughter and infant triangle of the final scene marks on the completion of Maya's journey to womanhood. Although she is still innocent and dependent, she shows signs of being able to control her life as a black woman.

Maya becomes confident of bringing up her child with the support of her mother. Vivian's suggestion was that Maya sleeping with her child accentuates her worry that she is too clumsy to handle a baby. Vivian banishes this fear by waking Maya and showing her the baby sleeping under a tent that Maya unconsciously formed with her body and a blanket. The author describes her mother's support to her, "See, you don't have to think about doing the right thing. If you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking" (281). According to Daryl C. Dance, the Black mother is "a figure of courage, strength, and endurance" (Lupton 66). Motherhood is one of the central ideas in contemporary literature written by the black women. Angelou and other autobiographers are consistently elaborating motherhood into a creative and personally fulfilling role.

Angelou always wanted to bring African culture into the American continent and assert the fact that her ancestral culture is never an inferior. She always felt proud to be identified as an African descendant. Even as a child, her grandmother had taken care to preserve some of the African traditions. When her mother cut a bob and straightened her hair, Angelou felt as if she herself was skinned and made bare that she felt ashamed of lost identity. She considered her kinky bush like hair as a marker of the African- American identity. Though she was always bothered about her looks, she was not ready to sacrifice her identity for her looks. She largely learnt "Tut language" and "Time-step" dance which had its ground in Africa. After her sojourn to Africa, she had created the "Black Blues Black" as a symbol of the black's identity.

Angelou made herself wonderful and different by singing folksongs, calypso, blues and of course "uh, uhuru" she understood that music could create changes in the mind of the people. She grew to become a prolific writer of poetry and her volume "Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water core I Diiiie" (1971) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and she herself was chosen by President Bill Clinton to recite her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" during his inauguration ceremony in 1993, a rare opportunity given to Black American woman. She used this chance to reveal herself, assert and establish her black identity as an African in America. Angelou, through her writings, brings out the existential anxiety the blacks suffered once; but she affirms the identity and creation of the blacks whether they live in Africa, their home land, or in America.



In all her autobiographies, Maya Angelou examines a black woman's struggle, the courageous fight she puts up against a racist and sexist society that stifles her growth towards selfhood and identity. The struggle in and of itself requires the need to reach an understanding of the racial past, as a meaningful part of the present, in order to redeem the self. Moreover, developing a consciousness to inherit the black heritage renews the black woman's sense of female community to find her vision into a larger world.

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