Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
http://www.rjelal.com; Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com

Vol.4.Issue 4. 2016
(Oct.Dec.)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

"SONG OF THE CAGED BIRD: THE INNER VOICE : FROM MAYA ANGELOU'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*

S.FARHAD
Assistant Professor, Sri Mittapalli College of Engineering
Guntur & Research Scholar (Ph.D)
Acharya Nagarjuna University

S.FARHAD

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with one of the autobiographical series of Maya Angelou as how she grew up black and female. Dominant in Angelou's autobiography is the exploration of the self – the self in relationship to the others. One of the central concerns in this study is the exploration of a particular kind of self and identity that emerges from her writings. A study of Maya Angelou's autobiography is significant not only because it offers insights into personal and group experience in America, but also because it is better than its formidable autobiographical predecessors. Angelou, throughout her autobiographical writing, adopts a special stance in relation to the self, the community and the world.

Key words: struggle, exploration of the self, search for identity, dispalcement, courage and perseverance.

KY PUBLICATIONS

> "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own". (Linda Brent. 1861:41).

Maya Angelou presents a powerful, authentic and profound signification of Afro-American life and the changing concerns of the Afro-American woman in her quest for personal autonomy, understanding and love. Such a statement, because of the simple, forthright and honest manner in which it is presented, is depicted against the larger struggle of Afro-American and African people for their liberation and triumphs. It is a celebration of their struggle, survival and existence. According to her long-time editor, Robert Loomis, "Maya is her books" (1988:187). Angelou calls herself an autobiographer, but insists that what she really is writing about is being human:

> I use the first person singular and I'm talking about the third person plural all the time, what it's like to be a human being, so the person who reads my work and suspects that he or she knows me hasn't gotten the half of the book, because he or she should know himself or herself better after reading my work. That's my prayer (1989: p.vii).

As Maya Angelou writes what she knows, she writes of race, and racism. Her work in not limited however to the Black – White issue, instead it is expansive in its focus on such universal issues as romantic love, lust, friendship, betrayal and loyalty. Ultimately her work is about survival – the survival of not only the Afro-American, but also the survival of the human race. . Like the accounts of Douglass, Baldwin,

Malcolm X, and Angela Davis, Angelou's autobiographical prose is characterized by political awareness, empathy or suffering, knowledge of oppression and communal responsibility. As an expression and signification of her experience, the autobiographical statement has became an extension of the word, that strange ritual through which the complex consciousness and historical unfolding of a people reveals itself. It is of and from this experience that Maya Angelou speaks. In her writings Angelou speaks in a confessional mode, as she tells us (1990:7).

> . . . someday somebody 'll stand up and talk about me, and write about me – Black and beautiful and sing about me, and put on plays about me! I reck'on it'll be myself! Yes it'll be me.

A product of the third period of African American autobiography and building upon the first and second period paradigms classically represented by Douglass and Wright respectively, Maya Angelou inaugurated a new phase of reminiscences of her experiences in the Black South. Angelou describes (1998:94) her enterprise as that of capturing the sounds of the Black voice, including her greater motives in recording her experience:

> I write for the Black voice and any ear which can bear it. As a composer writes for musical instruments and choreographer creates for the body, I search for sound tempos, and rhythms to ride through the vocal chord over the tongue and out of lips of Black people . . . I accept the glory of stridencies and purrings, trumpetings and somber sonorities.

In 1968 Angelou started her literary career as a writer, in 1969 she recorded her poetry. In 1970 she was appointed as writer-in-Residence at the University of Kansas and as a Yale University Fellow. Maya published here, the first of her five-volume autobiographical series, beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . Through the device of autobiography, Angelou has celebrated the richness and vitality of Southern Black life and the sense of community that persists in the face of poverty and racial prejudice, initially revealing this celebration through a portrait of life as experienced by a Black child in the Arkansas of the 1930s (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* , 1979). The second volume (*Gather Together in My Name*, 1974) delineates a young woman struggling to create an existence that provides security and love in Post-World War II America. The third (*Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry like Christmas*, 1976) presents a young, married adult in the 1950's seeking a carrer in show business and experiencing her first amiable contact with the Whites. The fourth volume (*the Heart of Woman*, 1980) shows a wiser, more mature woman in the 1960's examining the roles of being a woman and a mother. In her most recent volume, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), Angelou goes beyond familiar borders in order to see and understand the world from another's vantage point.

The ebb and flow of inter subjectivity that is at the centre of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is created by a tension between its author's vision and the persona's or character's subjective "gaze". Through visual artistic techniques applied to language, Angelou alternately holds the reader outside the text, offering a vision of aesthetics at work, and then abruptly, through the starkly personal and riveting gaze of her characters or personae compels the reader to enter into personal experience and reality. With respect to the *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and other African American autobiographies, Selwyn Cudjoe remarks (1989: 24) that, "they are formed from a convergence of traditions at variance among themselves" and concludes that "as a result, there is nothing in the autobiography that guarantees it will not be read as fiction or vice versa".

From the first page of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* [*], Angelou offers a tantalizing invitation into herself and then as promptly distances us from sharing that personal incommunicable experience. This invitation to come in and gaze, then that sudden refusal to give a eye contact, is a process that recurs throughout the work. This autobiographical volume is set in the Black community of the rural Deep South, for Angelou the Black community is more than a milieu or a setting. She is less concerned with recapturing the external conditions of her environment, in contrast she is concerned with recapturing her

growing awareness of her environment – her response to that environment – their manners, speech, gestures of bravado, their thoughts and dreams, as Maya Angelou has said to her interviewer George Goodman (1989:9):

> I'm going to write in *Caged Bird* about all those black men with their fists balled up who talk about nation buildin' time and then go home to rape their nieces and step-daughters . . . I'm going to tell it because rape and incest are rife in the black community that too in autobiographical form.

The other central themes that are central to and that recur throughout the autobiography are courage, perseverance, the persistence or renewal of innocence against overwhelming obstacles and the often difficult process of attaining selfhood. Related to these is the theme of survival, that is the conscious process of creating for one's self a particular pattern of living that allows one to cope with and transcend one's particular environment in order to achieve some measure of personal worth. Three themes common to her autobiographical writing: community, family and the individual. The concept of family evolves beyond the extended family to anetwork of relationships in which trust is the key to display of kinship relations: despite the concern for family, escape or migration from home and family is a recurrent pattern in Angelou's autobiography. It foreshadows the slow process of her evolving "self". Equally revealing is a thematic pattern wherein there are a series of incidents in which she is shocked by acts of injustice and shocked into an awareness of her racial identity. Angelou's initial crisis centres on her childhood identity and her acceptance as an outcast (because of her rejection by her parents) and how she had to repudiate her idealism inorder to free herself from other's control. Unlike Wright and Moody, Maya Angelou does not simply break away from or reject her past; rather like Maxine Hong Kingston she wrestles with it, defining herself through her participation in, as well as seperation from the past.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings was published on 12th February 1970; the title was taken from Paul Lawrence Dundar's *Sympathy.* As soon as it was launched publicly, critics had no reason to think that a first book by an entertainer would be of particular importance, although on that day the book received a noteworthy review *in The New York Times.* Shortly thereafter Robert A. Gross was all praise for the volume, (1990:23) noting that:

> It is more than a *tour de force* of language or the story of childhood suffering because it quietly and gracefully portrays and pays tribute to the courage, dignity and endurance of the small, rural Southern Black community in which [Angelou] spent most of her early years in the 1930s.

At about the same time, Edmund Fuller observed (1990:23) in his *Wall Street Journal* review that:

> Only the early signs of artistry and intellectual range are in this story, but their fullfillment are as evident in the writings as in the accomplishments of Maya Angelou's varied career.

Before the end of the year, other critics were heralding *Caged Bird* as marking the beginning of a new era in the consciousness of Black men and women and creating a distinctive place in Black autobiographical tradition. In this autobiography Angelou dwells at length on the influences, personal as well as cultural, historical and social that shaped her life. As Dolly A. McPherson says:

> I know no other autobiographer in America who celebrates and sings her life with as much verve and display of vulnerability as Maya Angelou. (1990:23).

As a black autobiographer Ms. Angelou stands beside the escaped slave Frederick Douglass. Like him, she can win the minds of her audience and speak not only for herself, but also for her race. She admits (1991:134) to taking on this representative role in the first volume of her autobiography:

> When I wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* , I wasn't thinking so much about my own life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people . . . I used the central figure – myself as a focus to show how one person can make it through those times.

Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* , like Richard Wright's Black Boy, opens with a primal childhood scene that brings into focus the nature of the imprisoning environment from which the black girl child seeks to escape. It is the story about what it means to grow up black and female in the American South during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. It recounts the life of Maya Angelou from age three to age sixteen, the first ten years of which she lived in Stamps, Arkansas and the last three in Los Angeles and San Francisco, respectively. The world to which Angelou intorduces us is embroided with humilation, violation, displacement and loss. From the opening of the work, Angelou sounds the themes that engage our attention in the entire book. The opening chapters unfold her identity crisis; she feels plain and ugly, ashamed of her skinny legs, and earns to have long blonde hair and blue eyes. It is clear when she announces that:

> If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult (Angelou Maya, 1970: 6).

Angelou does not relate all facets of her childhood experiences. Rather through a series of episodic chapters, she selects and chronicles those incidents from which she, as a girl-child, learned valuable life-determining truths about the world, about her community and about herself – truths incarnated in moments of insight (initiation) and discovery of the self. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is also a carefully conceived record of a young girl's slow and clumsy growth. It is also a record of her initiation into the world and her dicovery of her essential identity.

Selfhood, Angelou returns to the beginning of her quest. Her search for identity and sustained survival began way back in 1931, when she and her brother Bailey aged three and four respectively were sent to live with their grandmother, Annie Henderson Johnson, in Stamps, Arkansas, with a "To whom It may Concern" note tied to their wrist telling who they were and where they were bound. Descendants of orphaned slaves these orphans travel through life disperately in search of a home to escape the shadow of lonely displacement. Although Maya and Bailey are travelling towards the home of their grandmother, it is to be noted that they are travelling away from the home of their parents. Stamps, Arkansas does not offer a sense of place to Maya, as she says:

> The town reacted to us as its inhabitants had reacted to all things new before our coming (7).

Maya /Marguerite's story unfolds on an Easter congregation in Stamps, Arkansas; reciting a poem asking "what you looking at me for?" (4), she cannot remember the next lines and so this question imprints itself indelibly on the shame-filled silence. The book begins with an image of "coerced speech". Angelou is forced to recite a memorized text in front of a congregation. Here, it is a little girl thrust before community of people gathered to worship God, the Father. And she is painfully aware of the gap between that dream (to look like a movie star) and her actual physical appearance: she is wearing a dress that is "a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple thrown away" (5); her "skinny legs" and skin that looks dirty like mud seem to be the focus of everyone's gaze. Not surprisingly, she loses all her aplomb, forgets her lines, hears only the wigging and giggling of the other children running out of church: "I stumbled and started to say something, or may be to scream, but a green permission, or it could have been a lemon caught me between the legs and squeezed. I tasted the sour on my tongue and felt it in the back of my mouth. Then I before reached the door, the sting was burning down my legs and into my Sunday socks" (6). As she runs back home "peeing and crying", all she can think about is that she must not hold back the flow of urine. The problem is that she will surely get a whipping for losing mental and physical control and be mercilessly teased by the nasty children of the congrgation. Her anxiety to perform leads her to complete failure, and her failure results in harsh punishment imposed by family (the whipping) and society (the laughter of her peers).

This scene encapsulates all the elements that have become identified with the ambiguities of female performance – having to live up to an idealized image; feeling imprisoned in a body that

does not correspond to the idealized image. The flow of involuntary excertions is perceived as both releasing and threatening; if she holds it back, she may die from a busted head, if she lets it flow, she will surely be punisahed. Consequently her body has had the upper hand, its physical release from tension manifested in its uncontrolled urge to urinate. This opening scene squarely pits the mind against the body, the mind 'biting the red dust of Arkansas', because the body is such a great liability. It is particularly significant that this episode, chronologically out of sequence in the narrative sets the tone for the story. For this is clearly the tale of a woman who learns to let the words flow, and to find the positive links between body and mind that will allow her to break free of the cage of prejudice and self-harted.

To speak, to break the silence, becomes in this context an agony fraught with anxiety. Dramatizing her own ambivalent position as a writer of an autobiographical text Angelou begins with a moment of failed speech in which memory eludes her. She metaphorically saya, "what are you looking at me for? I did not come to stay" (3). Growing up in Stamps, Maya describes those bygone years as a continual struggle against surrender to their elders – whose roots were buried in Africa. Tradition demands that a child should look downwards while speaking to an adult, and should speak softly. Such a necessary response breeds an overriding self-criticism and self-depreciation of black experience.

Maya and Bailey gradually adjust to their new life in Stamps, becoming, integral parts of their Grandmother Henderson's store and religion, and of Uncle Willie's life and of the community itself. The aura of displacement is counter pointed by the ambience of displacement within the larger black community of Stamps, which is itself caged in the social reality of racial subordination and impotence. Nevertheless there is containedness in this environment called Stamps, just as there was in the Black community surrounding young Richard vWright, a containedness which in this case mitigates rather than intensifies the child's sense of displacement. Here is a safe way of life, certainly a hard way of life, but finally a known way of life. Maya like Richard, does not really want to fit in, but the town shapes her to fit in. and although she is lonely and suffers from her feelings of ugliness and abandonment, the strength of Momma's (Mrs. Hendreson, is addressed as Momma by Maya) arms makes her feel less lonely. Maya and Bailey spend long nights crying and sharing their loneliness as unwanted children who have been abondned, Maya and Bailey convince themselves that their mother is dead. Angelou recalls vividly the assault to the young Maya's diminished sense of self when she recieves her mother's first Christmas present. The tea set and a Christmas doll with blue eyes, rosy cheeks and yellow hair are all symbols of a white world foreign to the child's experience. Maya realizes that her mother is alive, but Maya the five-year-old has been the forgotten child for the last two years.

Maya is raised by the God-fearing Momma; the only Black in Stamps to have a business. Mrs. Henderson owns a country store and is a shrewd businesswoman. With a profound sense of moral duty and belief in hard work she rears Maya with a strict hand. From her Momma, Maya learns courage, control and 'grace under pressure'. Maya accompanies her Momma to weekly church services; periodic revival meetings and occasional confrontations with whites puctuate the young girl's eduacation. Through this indomitable woman, Maya is intorduced to the spiritual side of Black life. Maya and her brother are forced to attend church, where they amuse themselves – making fun of the more zealous members of the congregation.

Maya enjoy a close relationship with her brother Bailey. They share a love of literature, of Shakespeare, but primarily of Black writers. This early exposure to African American Literature – Langston Hughes, James Weldon Jhonson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and W.E.B. Du Bois helps Maya to strengthen her knowledge of the creative gifts of her people.

Angelou recalls that in Stamps, "segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like" (24). Yet the white world remains an ever – hovering dreaded threat. Total awareness of this threat leads to a clearly defined pattern of behaviour on the part of Blacks and respect for

certain codes of conduct, one of which is to survive in the South. As Angelou demonstrates, the life of the South is one of the conditions under which the workers of Stamps lived. The cotton pickers (whom Maya observes daily) must face on empty bag every morning, an empty every night, knowing all along that they would end the season as they had begun it – with no money and no credit. This undercurrent of social displacement, this fargility of the sense of belonging, is evident in the intrusion of white reality. She recounts some of her experiences of white brutality at her school when she observes what happends around her, the hypocritical speeches of the white superindent in their segregated school, who announces the improvements that are in store for the school system, that the white school will receive new microscopes and chemistry equipment, and the Negro school will get new paving for their athletic field, as Maya says, "the white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gaugins, and our boys (the girls weren't even on it) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises" (174). As Maya listens to the condescending and racist manner in which the white superindent speaks, she feels that the intelligence of her class is insulted. And here the sense of collective responsibility, a sensibility charged by the disparagment of the group is reflected. In the impotence of childhood there is nothing sha can do, but the changes which have been levelled against her people cananot be forgotten. Indeed, the act colours the texture of her world; she realizes the emptiness of the of the sentiments, which were expressed in the valedictory address, "I am master of my fate, I am captain of my soul" (168). It is out of this web of reality that she takes her first, fumbling steps toward her social development in Stamps, Arkansas.

Like many other Black autobiographers Maya Angelou vividly portrays the negative forces at work in the social and economic texture of Stamps, Arkansas; she also describes the Southern Black community as one that nurtures its members and helps them survive in such an antagonistic environment. There are numerous examples that demonstrate the communal character of life in Stamps. People help each other. During the Depression when no one has money, Grandmother employs a system of barter to help her neighbours and thus save her store. When Bailey does not return from a movie at his usual time the Black men and women share Grandmother's concern. One member's concern becomes the community's concern because members, in their practice of the rituals of extended family relationships are related through community and church. In winter, after the first frost, hog killings are spirited events that demonstrate community linkages and strength. Everyone is an important participant in this annual rite. As Angelou describes it,

> The missionary ladies of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Chrch helped Momma prepare the part for sausage . . . Men chopped off the larger pieces of meat and laid them in the smoke-house to begin the curling process (23).

Maya comes to realize at the church meetings that her neighbours use religion as a way of "basking in the righteousness of the poor and the exclusiveness of the down-trodden" (98). Finally when Grandmother Henderson and Maya are insultingly ejected from the office of a white dentist and told that he would rather stick his hand "in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (184), the child can only compensate for such painful impotence by her fantasizing powers and triumphant revange. The only way she can find solace is by fantasizing that her grandmother has ordered the white dentist to leave the town and that he actually obeyed her. In another incident where Maya is embarrassed is when her brother helps fish a decomposed Negro body out of the pond, whose body had been castrated because he had done "that" to a white woman; while the whites stand around and tell malicious jokes.

Apart from these incidents, there are other occasions that also teach Maya vital lessons in courage and survival and open her eyes to the fact that she belongs to an oppressed class. In Uncle Willie, for example, she sees the double jeopardy of being Black and crippled, when he is forced to hide in the potato bin when the sheriff casually warns Grandmother Henderson that local white lynchers will be on a rampage in the Black community.

Through this terrifying experience, Maya learns that lameness offers no protection from the wrath of bigots. Related to this there are other occasions which provide proof of a predatory white world and of white ritualistic violence against the Black male, when Bailey sees the castrated body of a Black man. Horrified by what he has seen but not understood, Bailey begins to ask questions that are dangerous for a young Black boy in the Arkansas of 1940. The incident leads Angelou to conclude bitterly that, "the Black woman in the South who raises sons, grandsons and nephews had her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose" (36).

To ensure her mental enslavement and become a very real part of her battle to survive in her world, the heavy-weight fight between Joe Louis (Black) and Primo Carners (White) intended to pacify, entertain and demonstrate how far blacks had arrived in the society, turns out instead to be a tableau in which black America came face to face with white America and in a strength of equals, the former triumphed even though only temporarily. Angelou describes the scene that takes place in her grandmother's store on the night of the fight as the real drama of American life played itself out in the boxing ring. Sports, as it were, become just another arena where the struggle for justice and liberation is carried on with gusto. The fight sends trills of pride through a black community vicariously winning over a white man (white community).

Angelou's consciousness of the oppression suffered by Black American's is honed by the realities of Maya's daily experience. Angelou recalls a painfully confusing incident that occurred, that she later would judge to be a pivotal experience in her initiation because it taught her an important lesson about her grandmother's ability to survive and triumph in a hostile environment. The incident involves three young white girls who were known to nettle Blacks and who have come into her grand mother's property to taunt the older Black woman with their rudeness, to ape her posture and mannerism and to address her insolently by her first name. throughout this scene grandmother stands solidly in her porch, smiling and humming a hymn. When their action produces no results, the girls turn to other means of mockery, making faces at Mrs. Henderson, whispering obscenities and doing handstands. The young Maya, who observes this painful scene from inside the store suffers the humilation. Maya wants to confront the girls directly, but she realizes that she is, "as the actors outside [are] confined to their roles" (30).

Throughout the incident Mrs. Henderson is a pillar of strength and dignity standing tall and firm. This scene is a dramatic and symbolic recreation of the kind of spiritual death and regeneration Angelou experienced during the shaping of her development. But it is also a vivid recapturing of Black/White tensions in the South of the 1930s.

When she is seven years old, Maya sees her parents for the first time in her memory. Bailey, Sr., makes an unexpected visit to Stamps and stuns Maya by the reality of his presence. Maya is terrified by the thought of seeing her elusive mother. She wants to beg her grandmother to allow her to remain in Stamps; the day finally arrives when Maya bids a tearful farewell to her grandmother and Uncle Willie. Suddenly she is compelled to leave Stamps and move to another place of promise, to her mother, aunts and uncles at St. Louis, but St. Louis remains a foreign country to the child, "in my mind I only stayed in St. Louis for a few weeks. As quickly as I understood that I had not reached my home . . . I carried the same shield that I had used in Stamps; I did not come to stay" (68). St. Louis provides Maya neither sense of place nor performance. For the young Maya, Stamps is a symbol of order; infact, the ordrliness of the store, the carefully arranged shelves, the counters and the cutting boards reflect the orderliness of her life in general.

Shifted from one temporary place to another, Maya develops a tough flexibility that is not her protective "shield" also her means of dealing with an uncertain world. Angelou's evocation of the palpable strangeness of the city derives from her ability as an artist, to maintain the child-like angle of vision in recreating that phase of her childhood. Yet, for one brief moment Maya is deluded into a false security, fantasizing that she is at home, at last, with her real father. For a moment, Mr. Freeman, Vivian Baxter's boyfriend and some one whom Maya has come to love and trust, hold her close to him.

Mr. Freeman's conscious violation of the child's trust, coupled by the child's own need for attention and physical closeness, lead to further violation of the eight-year-old. Maya is too young to understand:

> He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last. But then he rolled leaving me in a wet place, and stood up (71).

In the past Maya's world included Bailey, Grandmother and Uncle Willie, reading books and the Store; for the first time it has come to include physical contact. While not understanding what has taken place in her mother's bed, she becomes anxious to have the same experience, which she thought, made her feel so loved and secure. Mr. Freeman enlists the child's complicity by an act of metaphysical violence, informing her that he will kill her beloved brother Bailey if she tells anyone what "they" have done. For Maya, this prohibition prevents not so much telling as asking, for confused as she is by her conflicting feelings she has no idea about what has happened. Oneday, however Mr. Freeman stops her as she is setting out for the library, and it is then that he commits the actual rape on the terrified child, "a breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart" (76). Yet the rape of this eight year old by an almost impotent male who, it would seem, is unable enjoy a relatively mature and respectful relationship with an adult black woman, can only be seen as symbolic of one aspect of this internal dimension of black life. Maya retreats to her bed in a state of silent delirium, but the story emerges when her mother discovers her stained drawers and Mr. Freeman is duly arrested and brought to trail.

Angelou first connects her rape with the suffering of the poor. "the act of rape on an eight-year-old body", she writes, "is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't" (1992:251). In this description, Angelou subtly links her rapist with the wealthy man whom Jesus warned would have a difficult time getting into heaven, and she reinforces this by alluding to Jesus's words in her ironic decription of a black revival congregation: "The Lord love Himself said it world be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven?" (108). With the image of the camel and the needle, Angelou transforms her rape into a symbol of racism and somatophobia that afflict Maya and her race throughout much of *Caged Bird.*

The way in which Angelou presents the events leading both to her rape and to the trail provides an interesting context to the whole notion of familial rape versus social violation. Angelou illustrates in this context the theme of woman-as-spectacle and woman unwillingly displaying herself. Maya is made a laughing stock by neighbours who point out to her that "the worst is over for you" (81). This makes Maya to internalize the violence of the rape and turn herself into a source of violence rather than its victim. At the trial, the defence lawyer as usual attempts to blame the victim for her own rape. But Maya is compelled to lie because the crowd in the court expects her to say Mr. Freeman had not touched her before the rape. She chokes as she tells the lie and Mr. Freeman is sentenced to only a year and a day as punishment. Mr. Freeman very soon manages to get released the same afternoon and he is killed by her Baxter uncles. With Mr. Freeman's death Maya is overwhelmed withterror and remorse: "a man was dead because I lied" (84). Maya takes this death as proof that words have power to kill, she descends into a silence for five years. Maya now voluntarily assumes the silence that Mr. Freeman had imposed on her when he forbade her to reveal the rape to anyone else. She internalizes ahegemonic definition of women (even a pre-pubescent girl) as sexual and therefore dangerous.

Since then, Maya does not behave as the person they know and accept her to be. On many occasions, she is thrashed by any relative who feels offended by her silence. When the family can no longer tolerate Maya's "grim presence", Vivian Baxter again banishes Maya and Bailey to Stamps, Arkansas, fulfilling Maya's prophesy that she had not come to St. Louis to stay.

Her return to Stamps is welcome to Maya, where she finds comfort in the barrenness and solitude of a place where nothing happens. Of this Angelou writes:

> After St. Louis, with its noise and activity, its trucks and buses, and loud family gathering, I welcomed the obscure lanes and lonely bunglows set back deep in dirty yard (86).

Maya lives in "perfect personal silence" for nearly five years later, until she meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a Black intellectual. It is Mrs. Flowers who opens the doors to the caged bird's silence with the key of loving acceptance. She helps Maya to begin to have some self-confidence, by contributing to the young girl's affirmation of her identity, "I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected . . . for just being Marguerite Johnson" (97). Such respect and affection from an older person has a positive effect on ayoung girl suffering from the guilt and self-loathing that resulted from being raped by her mother's boy friend. Maya states, "Mrs. Flowers monitors Maya's growing hunger and quest for individuality by giving her books of poetry and talking to her about books and philosophy. Mrs. Flowers reads passages from *A Tale of Two Cities* to Maya hears poetry for the first time in her life through Mrs. Flowers.

But while a consciousness of her own Self-worth germinates inside her, outside, in the life that revolves around her, hovers the stagnant air of the impotence and frustration. And precisely because she has always remained an outsider to the way of life in stampa and precisely because she is beginning to feel the power of her her own selfhood, Maya recalls vividly specific moments. One gesture, however, foreshadows Maya's eventual inability to sit quietly and is very much an expression of her growing acceptance of her own self-worth. During a brief time, Maya had worked in the house of Mrs. Viola Culinan, a wealthy transplanted virginian. With the arrogance of a Southern white woman whom neither custom nor tradition had taught to respect a Black person, Mrs. Culinan insults Maya by calling Mary rather than Marguerite, a name that Mrs. Culinan considers too cumbersome. Mrs. Culinan's attempt to change Maya's name for her own covenience echoes the larger tradition of American racism that attempts to prescribe the nature and limitations of a Black person's identity. Mrs. Culinan refuses to acknowledge her humanity. A sensitive, reflective nature, combined with an alert intelligence enables Maya to comperhend the nature of this insult. Maya strikes back, deliberately breaking several pieces of Mrs. Culinan's heirloom China. In doing so, she affirms her individuality and a value.

Angelou's complex awareness of what Black men, women and children encounter in their struggle for selfhood is apparent in each of these incidents. Such experience are recorded not simply as historical events but as symbolic revelations of Angelo's inner world. But now there is yet another move to war-time San Francisco, as Maya and Bailey decide to live with their mother whom they have not seen in six years. In San Francisco the tender-hearted girl changes into another imagined self – compound of her mother and Mrs. Flowers. From her prosperous stepfather, Maya recieves a basic ghetto education. Here Maya is intorduced to a colourful cast of urban street characters (i.e., Stone Wall Jimmy, Just Black, Cool Clyde, Tight Coat and Red Leg) who make their living through gambling and trickery. Here she learns a new morality: the black American ghetto ethic by which "that man who is offered only the crumbs from his country's table . . . by ingenunity and courage, is able to take of himself a Lucullan feast" (212) Mr. Leg's story, for example, is an excellent portrayal of such an individual and a brilliant recapturing of the trickster motif found in African and Afro-American literature. Through trickery, Mr. Red Leg, a con artist and a hero-figure of Black American urban folklore, outwits his white antagonist. In doing so, he symbolizes the strength, dignity and courage Black Americans are able to manifest inspite of their circumscribed lives. Black men like Mr. Red Leg, use "their intelligence to pry open the door of rejection and [who] not only [become] wealthy but [get] some revenge in the bargain" (218). These characters are heroes to Maya and her Black associates. Three other experiences further dramatize Angelou's awareness of her self and her world, changing sometimes with a bewildering speed, and help her

to work out new patterns of selfhood and personal direction. In San Fransico, for the first time she feels, "I perceived myself as part of something" (220). Maya had been on the move when she entered Stamps and thus could not settle into its rigid way of life. She chose to remain an outsider and in so doing, chose not to allow her personality to become rigidfied. The fluidity of her new environment, however, matches the fluidity of her physical, psychological, and intellectual life. She feels in place in an environment where every one and everything seem out of place.

Even more significant than the total dispklacement from San Fransisco is Maya's trip to Mexico with her father. The older Maya in giving form to her past experience, discovers that this moment is a turning point in her quest after authentic selfhood.

Maya accompanies her father to a small Mexican town where he proceeds to get obliviously drunk, leaving her with the responsibility of getting them back to Los Angeles by car, Maya without any driving experience manages to drive down the circuitous mountain road for about fifty miles, to cross the border and to return safely to California. Maya recalls;

> The challenge was exhilarating. It was me, Marguerite, against the elemental opposition. As I twisted the steering wheel and forced the accelerator to the floor, I was controlling Mexico, and might and aloneness and inexperienced youth and Bailey Johnson, Sr., and death and insecurity and even gravity (230).

Unlike, any of her former experiences in Stamps, this simple experience proves to Maya that she can indeed have power over her life and destiny. Her new sense of power contracts vividly with her former despair that as a Negro she has no control over her fate.

Soon after their return to California a bitter argument follows between Maya and Doleres (her father's current "girlfriend"), who wants Bailey's daughter out of her home and her life. Urging Maya to return to her mother, Dolores calls Vivian Baxters a whore. When Maya slaps her, Dolores cuts Maya severely. After taking her to one of his friends for emergency medical care, Bailey, Sr., leaves her with a second friend. Knowing that violence would ensure if she returned home and her mother had learnt that she had been cut, Maya leaves without telling her father or his friend, and after wandering about San Diego for some while, joins a junkyard commune of homeless children whom she describes as "the silt of war frenzy" (240). After she has spent a month in the commune, Maya's thought processes have altered so significantly that she is hardly able to recognize her former self. Her peers' unquestioning acceptance dislodges her familiar feelings of insecurity; moreover, the unrestrained life that she experiences within the group expands her spiritual horizons and "initiates [her] into the brotherhood of man" (241). The gratitude Angelou owes to those who befriended her on her passage from childhood to adolescence to adulthood will foreever include her junkyard family:

> After hunting down unbroken bottles and selling them with a white girl from Missouri, a Mexican girl from Los Angeles and a Black girl from Oklahoma, I was never again to sense myself so solidly out of the pale of the human race. The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life (247).

Time and time again, Angelou brings us to the question of human relationships. Through the junkyard experience, she learns that beyond the barriers of race, all men and women are the same; they share the same fears, the same loneliness and the same hopes. Months later when Angelou becomes the first Black hired as aconductor on the San Fransisco streetcars, her determination and success in this venture can be directly attributed to these pivotal experiences in Mexico and California.

Within strictly legal confines, such an ability is the essence of the American myth of success. The product of broken family, raped at age eight, Angelou was offered at first "only the crumbs" from her "country's table". Angelou must confront and overcome another obstacle. She must still break open the bars of her female sexuality. Although she now feels power over her social identity, she feels insecurity about her sexual identity. She remains the

embarrassed child who stands before the Easter congregation asking, "what you looking at me for?" (4) The bars of her physical being close in on her, threatening her peace of mind. The lack of feminity in her small-breasted, stright-lined hairless physique and the heaviness of her voice becomes in her imagination symptomatic of latent lesbian tendencies. A gnawing self-consciouness plagues her. This problem relates to numerous questions about her sexuality, when she is convinced after the third reading of Radclyff Hall's, *The Well of Loneliness.* For weeks Angelou seeks answers to her questions, probing into unsatisfying books and into her own unstocked mind without finding a morsel of peace or understanding. When she finally approaches her mother to seek answers to the questions about her sexuality and about the disturbing physical changes that are taking place in her body, Vivian Baxter gently reassures her daughter that the physical changes are just human nature. Even though her mother's amused knowledge disperses her fears, the mere fact of her attraction to a classmate's breasts undermines any confidence that reassurance can provide. The only remedy available to her seems to be a heterosexual liaison. Seeking physical knowledge of her sexuality, Maya determines to have sex with one of the most eligible young men in the neighbourhood. She asks a neighbour to have a sexual intercourse with her. Their encounter, which is underdeemed by shared tenderness, leaves sixteen year old Maya pregnant and alone. Her pregnency provides her a climatic reassuarance that she is indeed a hetrosexual woman. The young man quits during her fourth month of pregnency and Maya's brother, who is overseas, advices her not to tell her parents until she graduates from high school. Maya is literally alone all along her pregnency, for she manages to keep this fact hidden from her mother, teachers and her friends for eight months and a week. The birth of the baby boy brings back Maya to some thing totally her own. More important, it brings her to a recognition and acceptance of her full, instinctual womanhood. The child, father to the woman, opens the caged door and allows the fully developed woman to fly out. Now she feels the control of her sexual identity as well as her social identity:

> I had a baby. He was beautiful and mine. Totally mine. No one had bought him for me. No one had helped me endure the sickly gray months. I had had help in the child's conception; but no one could deny that I had an immaculate pregnancy (280).

The birth of Maya's son is an aberration of new life, Maya's own rebirth as a young mother and of Maya's discovery of her creature self. Later when Maya is reluctant to let her three-week-old baby to sleep with her lest she would crush him, Vivian Baxter allays her fears and suggests that Maya should sleep with her child. Maya, on her mother's suggestion, accepts to sleep beside her child it is than that she realizes the awakened innate motherhood in her. It is then that she gains physical, intellectual and spiritual self-mastery.

The Black American child has succeeded in freeing herself from the natural and social bars imprisoning her in cage of her own diminished self-image by assuming control of her life and fully accepting her black womanhood. The displaced child has found a "place". With the birth of her child, Maya is herself born into a mature engagement with the forces of life. In welcoming that struggle, she refuses to live a death-in-life of quiet acquiescence: "Few, of any survive their teens. Most surrender to the vague but murderous pressure of adult conformity. It becomes esier to die and avoid conflicts than to maintain a constant battle with the superior forces of maturity" (231). Maya undergoes the archetypal American journey of intiation and discovery. Angelou's work asserts that although suffering may be extremely demoralizing and painful, it can have a regenerating effect on those that are sensitive, intelligent and morally aware. Maya Angelou's significance as an autobiographer rests upon her exceptional ability to narrate her life. As Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of *New York Times* has aptly put it, "it is a, a carefully wrought, simultaniously touching and comic memoir whose beauty is not in the story but the telling" (1989:101).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* not only does the black girl-child struggle successfully for the freedom of self-worth; the black self also returns to and accepts the past in its own terms by immersing herself in the medium of her making and

constructing a symbolic way of life. The liabilities inherent in the way of life are transformed through the agency of art into a positive force.

The tiltle of Maya Angelou's first volume, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* , introduces the major metaphors that recur in all her five books – imprisonment and singing. In *Black Autobiography in America,* StephenButterfield compares this work with those of Richard Wright and Frederick Douglass. The male writers, he says tend to portray their lives of struggle against the opressor and their efforts to destroy the "cage" of racism and slavery, "But unlike Black Boy and The Life and Times, the subject of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is not really the struggle of the bird; "it is the exploration of the cage, the gradual discovery of its boundaries, the loosening of certain bars that she can slip through when the keeper's backs are turned" (Lionnet Francoise 1989: 144).

Indeed Maya's "Struggle" is of a different nature from that of the males: more personal and less public or social. There are no direct or violent confrontations, with intense racial overtones. Her sense of humour is in sharp contrast to the seriousness of a Richard Wright. As the title of the volume implies, her subject is much more than the "exploration" or representation of this circumscribed domain. It is, rather, the investigation of the process through which the "bird" learns how to sing and the reason "why" she does so in the face of adversity.

The task of the autobiography as Selwyn R. Cudjoe (1984: 16-17) puts it, "is not the mere reproduction of naturalistic detail but, because it involves the creative organization of ideas and situations and makes an ethical and moral statement about the society, must generate that which is purposeful and significant for our liberation". In fact, the "Principle of Reverse" of which Angelou speaks, may help an individual to get over intially but precisely because of its inherent characterstics, it follows that it can reverse itself and make the apparent victor its victim, but certainly does not and cannot reverse the situation which makes the violation and denigration of the Black female possible in the society.

Richard Wright gave his "whole being" over to coping with the atrocities that surrounded him and Douglass's principal concern was always the abolition of slavery, for Maya Angelou resentment of the whites and necessity to break through their closed walls of hostility, were forced on her from time to time because she had to live in relation to their world; she experienced often the humilation of their scorn without being able to make an honorable response. From this stand point, she winds her way to a conclusion that asserts that the black woman is assaulted in her tender years by all the ruling white factors and at the same time from within her society. Since *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* , was written in the late sixties, at the height of black power movement, and at a time that was still dbating the value of Martin Luther King's belief in non-violent protest, it is no surprise that this act of protest and its climatic moment of resistance of white oppression find expression in her helpless indignation, subtle resistance and active protest in the book.

Roy Pascal observes that autobiography acquires its shape through the autobiographer's consciousness of what the child ultimately becomes. Angelou is able to confront her memories of her own past with honesty, humour and irony because they form a necessary part of her spiritual and intellectual development. She believes as most autobiographers, that memory affords access to the past that is worth revealing and that an understanding of the human condition – not information about a life, but insight into its process – is intrinsically valuable. The narrative voice at work is that of the older autobiographer who is not only aware of the journey, but also enlarged by it, an achievement that is emphasized by the affirming nature of the work. Even if Angelou had focused on only the psychological trauma of her early years or had merely probed the fragile relationship between the environment and her coming of age. While Angelou constantly demonstrates the "unnecessary insult" of Southern Black girlhood in her passage from childhood to adolescence, at the same time she skillfully recreates those psychic, intellectual and emotional parents that identify her individual consciousness and experience. In doing so, Angelou

made the song of the caged bird a successful and an inspiring journey.

Mrs. Flowers, her surrogate mother, taught her certain "lessons of life", one of which had directly to do with Maya's sensitivity to the language of Stamps:

> She said I must always be intolerent of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely saying was couched the collective wisdom of generations (97).

The "collective wisdom of generations" is part of what shaped Maya Angelou's identity. That she chooses to recreate the past in its own sounds suggests that she accepts the past and recognizes its beauty and its ugliness, its strengths and it weaknesses. In *Caged Bird,* not only does the black girl child struggle successfully for the freedom of self worth; the black self also returns to and accepts the past in the return to full and full acceptance of its language, a symbolic construction of way of life.

By the end of CAGED BIRD, the displaced young Maya has found a place and has discovered a vital dimension of her self. By the end of the autobiography, Angelou has succeeded in freeing herself from her cage by assuming control of her life and fully accepting her womanhood. Maya Angelou under goes the archetypal American journey of initiaion and discovery.

REFERENCES

1. Angelou Maya : *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . New York: Random House, 1970.
2. Angelou, Maya. *Black Scholar*, 8. 1977: 44-33.
3. Cudjoe, Selwyn R. "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement." in *Black Women Writers* (1950- 1980): *A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Mari Evans. Garden City: Anchor Doubleday, 1984.
4. Lionnet, Francoise. "Con Artists and Story Tellers: Maya Angelou's Problematic Sense of Audience." In Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998.
5. Gilbert, Susan. "Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings :* Paths to Escape." Mount Olive Review, 1.1, 1987: 39- 50.
6. Fox, Genovese, Elizabeth. "Myth and History: Discourse of Origins in Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou." Black American Literature Forum, 24-1, 1990; 221-36.
7. Evan, Maris. Ed. *Black Women Writers* (1950 - 1980): *A Critical Evaluation*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1984.
8. Pascal, Roy. Design and Truth in Aotubiography. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.