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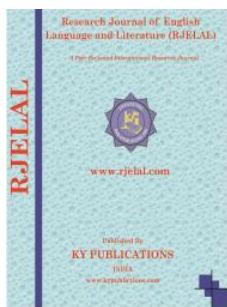
## SURVIVAL AND SELF-IDENTITY THROUGH RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST: A STUDY ON MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper aims at studying how Maya Angelou has travelled from the life of trauma to a position finding her identity and self-esteem which is viewed as the remarkable achievement of a woman as described by herself in all her works. The paper also focuses how the sexual exploitation and racial discrimination have affected the life of Maya Angelou and her strive for the survival and an individuality. Her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is read from the perspectives of racism and trauma.

**KEYWORDS:** Racism, Self-Esteem, Self- Identity, Memory, Trauma, Survival.

### INTRODUCTION

During an interview with Judith Paterson in the year 1982 issue of *Vogue*, Maya Angelou said, " I will not allow anybody to minimize my life, not anybody, not a living soul – nobody, no lover, no mother, no son, no boss, no president, nobody" (119). Maya Angelou (April 4, 1928-May 28, 2014) stood for freedom – from any kind of bondage. No relationship could bind her down, she explains. She had been a singer, dancer and an actress, not tied to any one profession or career.

*I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings* (1969) is first of her six volume autobiographies. In her autobiographies, she covers forty years of her life, starting from the day she boarded the train for Arkansas. With the birth of her only son at the age of sixteen, she concludes her first autobiography. Using a masterful language, she portrays forty years of her life in her autobiographies.

Angelou adopted this title from the poem "Sympathy" which was written by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. The poem describes a caged bird which symbolizes the lives of oppressed black Americans or all the oppressed people in general. The most significant part of this literary work is the memory of her days starting from the age of three. Memory can be explained as the selection of images from her perspective. Each image is like a thread; they are woven together to form a meaning. Memory is not something concrete, definitive, and reproducible; instead it is ever-shifting in shape and meaning. Angelou discusses about the selected incidents which changed her life, reconstructing her past. This method of reconstruction continuously does the process of selecting, adding, deleting and rearranging. This process is to serve the ongoing adaptive process of survival and living of Angelou.

#### PORTRAYAL OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LIFE:

In her autobiographical work which spans from 1931 to 1944, Angelou gives a realistic portrayal of the Great Depression and the World War II, which marked the history of her period. The introduction of improved mechanical cotton picker during World War II clinched the southern agricultural transformation. Maya Angelou keenly observes the cotton workers who visit the Store, she gains insight into their inner lives. The formal name of the Store was the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store. The Store is built in the heart of the Negro area where African Americans lived away from white Americans. Over the years it became the lay centre of activities in town (Angelou8). In the early dawn hours, Maya Angelou observes the cotton workers, gay and full of morning vigour, as they wait for the wagons to come and take them to the fields. Angelou describes the life of African – Americans in the neighbourhood:

In those tender mornings the Store was full of laughing, joking, boasting and bragging. One man was going to pick two hundred pounds of cotton, and another three hundred. Even the children were promising to bring home fo' bits and six bits...In later years I was to confront the stereotyped picture of gay song-singing cotton pickers with such inordinate rage that I was told even by fellow Blacks that my paranoia was embarrassing. But I had seen the fingers cut by the mean little cotton balls, and I had witnessed the backs and shoulders and arms and legs resisting any further demands (Angelou11).

Angelou recalls that it was the later afternoon that revealed the actual harshness of the black Southern life, which the early mornings had softened with nature's blessings of grogginess, forgetfulness, and the soft lamplight. She vividly portrays the negative social and economic texture of Stamps, Arkansas. She describes the black community as one that nurtures its members and helps them to survive in an antagonistic environment.

The autobiography provides a sense of the black community, a sense of oneness and a sense of fused strength. The changing seasons, for example, provide opportunities for fellowship and festivity. 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. Angelou describes the social and familial bonding of these women with a touch of humour:

The missionary ladies of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church helped Momma prepare the pork for sausage. They squeezed their fat arms elbow deep in the ground meat, mixed it with gray nose-opening sage, pepper and salt, and made tasty little samples for all obedient children who brought wood for the slick black stove (Angelou26).

#### AFRICAN- AMERICAN WOMEN: THE OPTIMIST

Hard times were nothing new to Afro-American Women. During the hard times, these people worked harder to survive. So the Black women had three responsibilities during this time. They had to earn cash through paid employment. Secondly, they had to take care of their families and friends in an unwaged labour. Thirdly, they had to work in building communities and social changes with voluntary labour in churches, clubs and political organisations. Angelou brings out the positivity of black women:

Many women who worked in their kitchens traded at our Store, and when they carried their finished laundry back to town they often set the big baskets down on our front porch to pull a singular piece from the stretched collection and show either how graceful was their ironing hand or how rich and opulent was the property of their employers (Angelou28).

Here, Angelou describes that the black women have a high level of optimism despite their hardships. Women had to play dual role in their everyday life and it assured that black women had strong shoulders to bear that heavy load during

1930's. The Black women whether they lived on the cotton plantations or Harlem faced higher rates of unemployment than white women and men. Often, they were higher than their Black men.

#### RACISM: A TRAUMA

Angelou begins with a dedication of the autobiography to her son, Guy Johnson, and to all the strong black birds of promise who defy the odds and gods and sing their freedom. The original text begins with an untitled prelude. In that, she recalls an Easter day at the Coloured Methodist Episcopal church. She says that she is so happy about her new Easter dress which Momma had given her. She thinks she will also "look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world" (Angelou 4). But the Easter morning had shown the dress as ugly and it has been thrown away by a white woman. She thinks that being black is an ugly dream. In the book *Souls of the Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois says about the problem of "color line". He says:

Why did God make me an Outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above (34).

Maya Angelou echoes Du Bois when she thinks that she is unattractive. Then she runs out of the church crying and she is ashamed. She ends the prelude by stating 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" (Angelou6). The metaphor of razor that is rusted explains the pain and the prolonging suffering of African Americans. The razor is not only sharp and at the throat, but is also rusted, adding to health hazards, she suggests strongly. This gives a vivid sample picture of her passion and anger in the complete text and speaks how she became the voice of all her suppressed women.

Maya Angelou also developed an interest in the writings of William Shakespeare. The stories inspired her to live life with zest.

I met in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love. It was Shakespeare who said, 'When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes.' It was a state with which I felt myself most familiar. I pacified myself about his whiteness by saying that after all he had been dead so long it couldn't matter to anyone anymore (Angelou16).

W.E.B. Du Bois forecasted that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (4). The casual relationship between the "problem of the color-line" and trauma has become increasingly visible in the life of Maya Angelou. Race trauma generated by slavery, lynching, and everyday racial harassment has been deeply rooted in the African American consciousness and it has formed the backdrop for the more subtle yet just as insidiously widespread contemporary traumatic experiences of racism. Ron Eyerman, Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University also expresses the same perspective in his book, *Cultural Trauma (2001)* as:

Here lie the roots and routes of cultural trauma. For blacks, this rejection after the raised expectations engendered by emancipation and reconstruction forced a rethinking of their relationship to American society. This was traumatic not only because of crushed expectations but also because it necessitated a reevaluation of the past and its meaning regarding individual and collective identity (24).

Another aspect of racial terrorism is chronic sexual exploitation. Black women experience the exploitation and undergo the trauma. Maya Angelou decided that St. Louis is a foreign country and to shield herself she reads fairy tales. Her mother, Vivian works at a gambling parlour at night. Maya Angelou feels pity for Mr. Freeman because he waits for Vivian at home. Maya Angelou used to sleep with her mother along with Mr. Freeman, her mother's companion. Maya Angelou finds a substitute for

fatherly figure in Mr. Freeman. It is because she is attracted and likes the attention that she gained from them. Maya Angelou feels pity for Mr. Freeman because he waits for Vivian Baxter who has to return from the gambling parlour. One morning, she gets out of bed for an early errand, and Maya Angelou fell asleep again. He molests Maya Angelou and threatens her by saying that if she tells anybody he would kill Bailey. But Maya Angelou doesn't understand what has happened for him to threaten her so.

His legs were squeezing my waist... he released me enough to snatch down my bloomers, and then he dragged me closer to him. Turning up the radio up loud, too loud, he said, 'If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey' (Angelou 84).

One night, Vivian doesn't return home and Mr. Freeman rapes Maya Angelou. He threatens not to scream or tell anyone. Afterward, he sends her to the library, but she returns home and goes straight to bed. The experience marks that child's outlook of life- she realises that she is a 'female' and her body is the site of sexual trauma.

Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight year old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot (Angelou 84).

Deborah M. Horvitz observes in her book *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction*:

The female body "converts" emotional pain into physical or somatic symptoms so that the body always "narrates" the story. Of course, the body is the site of sexual trauma; but, in addition, it operates as the site of the trauma's displacement, because it is the conduit through which the symbolic or "imagined" hysterical symptoms are expressed (69).

The body of women can be traumatized and Maya had to come to terms with this social reality. Rape victims are mentally and physically injured and sexual exploitation is a traumatic experience.

As a child, Maya Angelou says elders used to say unkind things about her features. She has kinky hair and dark skin, and she is large for her age. Whenever the remarks they gave, Bailey would wink at her and then he would take revenge and defend her. She says, her black pretty brother was her kingdom. Bell Hooks, an American author, feminist and social activist mentions in her book, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem (2002)*:

The identifiable dark skin was considered by white Christians the mark of shame that singled out these groups to be subordinated, to serve those superior "white" bodies were chosen... Mocking, ridiculing, and labelling black bodies as animalistic were all the ways a system of psychological terrorism was put in place before actual interracial contact (36).

#### JOURNEY OF SELF- IDENTITY:

During Maya Angelou's eight graduation, a white speaker named Edward Donleavy, speaks that the black community could produce only athletes and those words had left the audience with heavy hearts. After him, Henry Reed's talks with clarity and strength. Then he sings "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", a popular National anthem of Black community.

Lift every voice and sing,  
Till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise  
High as the list'ning skies,  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea  
(Weldon Johnson).

It was the first time Maya Angelou listens to the words of the anthem and then she feels proud of her community. The African community keeps strengthening itself through songs and poems and Maya Angelou, like most of her fellow beings becomes uplifted with the words of the local popular song.

Eric J. Bailey talks about this issue of constructing identity in her book titled *Black America, Body Beautiful: How the African American Image is Changing Fashion, Fitness, and Other Industries*:

So as an African American, you're always striving to find your self-identity particularly in a society that has historically not respected you for who you are and within a community (African American) that strives to maintain its foundation and self-worth (8).

As the U.S enters the World War II, Vivian marries Daddy Clidell, a successful businessman and the family moves to San Francisco. He becomes the true fatherly figure who is tender and strong. Maya Angelou witnesses the changes occurring in San Francisco during the period of World War II. The blacks were focusing on their advancements and not on the whites' prejudices. When Maya Angelou was fourteen she received a scholarship and it gave her the chance to learn Music and drama which became her primary identity in later life.

Maya Angelou decides to take a semester off and looked for a job. She became the first black person to work in San Francisco. *The Well of Loneliness*, a classic lesbian fiction, makes Maya Angelou to confuse lesbianism with hermaphrodite. She fears that she could be a lesbian. So she decides to get a boyfriend to clear her confusion which resulted in pregnancy. She takes up full responsibility and Vivian and Daddy Clidell accept her pregnancy. The first autobiography ends as Maya Angelou gives birth to a boy. She transforms into a woman who has known pain and suffering. While speaking to Patricia Cohen, cultural reporter for The New York Times at The Times Center in New York City, Maya Angelou says:

Women have stepped into the new world. You have the possibility of not only being a woman but becoming a mother and this is an indication that you have the door opening for you in a marvellous way. A woman liberates a woman. A girl into womanhood. I think that is probably the

great gift of a mother to a daughter (Cohen 00:03:19-23).

Angelou considers motherhood as a process of liberation. She liberates herself by giving birth to a son. The sexual assault of Maya Angelou in the autobiography becomes a central experience and Barbara Smith analyses that:

It seems overwhelming to break such a massive silence. Even more numbing, however, is the realization that so many of the women who will read this have not yet noticed us missing either from their reading matter, their politics, or their lives (5).

Likewise, the assault which happens to the black females are not noticed and they are not given much importance. But Maya Angelou breaks the silence and makes the readers listen to her traumatic experience. The whole autobiography is said from a child's perspective. Maya Angelou records her childhood life in separation from her mother and father; reveals her strong religious and communal connections, and the days spent with her paternal grandmother. She discloses her life story through her narration focusing on the life of a southern black female. The text is a journey in quest of self- knowledge and self- identity. While seeing Maya Angelou in the hierarchy of black autobiography, she takes up the common themes of white racism and the black's reaction to it, quests for identity, and the achievements. In the introductory chapter of *I Never told anyone* (1983), Ellen Bass describes the empowerment of child abuse victims through their emerging voices:

A woman wrote of her experience: a small child, asleep in her bed, ....the pain, and confusion, fear, blurred in sleep...the repetition through childhood, into adolescence- a cycle of rape, shame, and unshared, unshareable torment. This woman read her words aloud. Slowly and with great effort, with perseverance, with willingness to face the pain, the rage, the disgust- with courage, with tears, with integrity, with hunger for survival and for a meaningful, nurturing life, she spoke with words, she mourned her past,

she celebrated her survival, her strength (23).

Like the woman mentioned here, Maya Angelou struggles to heal herself by coming to terms with the abuse that she suffered and confronting her abusers with words. As southern black girl who faces the severity of racism, abandonment, sexual abuse and identity confusion. Her autobiographies were a result of oppression and directed at the white audience at many ways. The autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged bird sings* talks about various themes. The prominent themes like Racism and the role of a black woman can be traced in the work. The autobiographies reveal her will power, grit and intellectual prowess. Angelou has the ability of recreating and reconstructing the reality of personal, family and community in the contemporary American society. Maya Angelou seeks to discover herself from all the traumatic life experiences and she finds her identity as a writer.

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