



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 11. Issue.1. 2024 (Jan-March)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

MAYA ANGELOU'S 'I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS': AN INDICTMENT OF  
WHITE TYRANNY

Dr. SAMAH THABET

The English Department, College of Sciences and Arts, Tubarjal,  
Jouf University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.11.1.56](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.11.1.56)



ABSTRACT

The study of Angelou's most celebrated novel *'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings'* meticulously depicts the throes of growing up in a racist, segregated, chauvinistic society. In a corollary act, it also pays tribute to the endurance of her entire race in their small, rural southern community. Angelou's life-story evidently reveals her tenacity and ability to fend for herself; as the central figure symbolizing every black girl growing up in the American South in the 1930's

**Key words:** Racism, Alienation, Captivity, Angelou

Article information

Article Received:04/1/2024  
Article Accepted:01/02/2024  
Published online:06/02/2024

I. Introduction

Maya Angelou (1928 - 2014) is a prolific, multi-talented black woman writer. She is a poetess, historian, authoress, editor, civil-rights activists, producer, actress, playwright, and director. Besides publishing close to ten best-selling books and countless articles, she speaks many languages, lectures in several universities in the U.S and abroad and is currently a Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake University in North Carolina. The first black female to write a screenplay and musical score of a Hollywood movie, Angelou received many honorary degrees and literary awards, was named "The Woman of the Year" in 1975 by *The Ladies' House Journal* and delivered the 1993 presidential inauguration poem at the request of President Clinton.

The major bulk of criticism on Maya Angelou confirms her status as an epitome of a new generation of black female writers, a great voice of contemporary Afro-American literature and a resilient woman, who could overcome obstacles of race and gender to rise to glory. Her writings have also elicited great interest due to her ability to juxtapose her personal trauma with the collective suffering of her black people, particularly the five volumes of her autobiography that span almost a century from the late 1920's up till the early 1970's. The first volume, *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*, is deemed the best and most successful one that brought her in the limelight. It scored a great positive popular, commercial, and critical reception as her "most celebrated novel" (McDowell 17). Also dubbed as "a literary breakthrough" as well as "a timely book" (ibid. 81) in which she writes about herself, but "in fact writing about the temper of the times" (ibid.60), it was nominated for The National Book Award twice in 1970 and 1995 and The Pulitzer Prize in 1970, topped the list of *The New York Times* paperback bestsellers for a hundred and fifty three weeks and was named among the best hundred books for young adults by The Young Adults Library Services Association in 1997.

## 2. Analysis

Maya Angelou's, **I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS** (1970) is a chronicle of her life from the age of three to sixteen in the pre-civil rights south in the 1930's. As her most celebrated novel consistent with her abundant life, it enabled her to win national, literary recognition and achieve prominence with its stunning reception as a poignant account of Blacks' victimization by racial prejudice. As member of the Harlem Writers Guild, Angelou shared in the collective cultural activity to emphasize the African – American heritage and renew interest in Negro culture. Her ability to speak for herself as well as her race and gender verifies her testimony to Sendi Russell in *African – American Women Writers from Slavery to the Present* (1990):

On writing it, I wasn't thinking so much about my life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and influences of that time on a number of people (134).

It commences with her misery as an unwanted child. At the age of three, she and her brother Bailey were sent to Arkansas, Stamps, "wearing tags (of names) on (their)wrists which instructed ' To Whom It May Concern' (5) , thus named and branded like cattle or pigs. After their parents' split-up, they were to be reared by their paternal Gram Mrs. Henderson. They stand for millions of forlorn children of their contemporaries who lived remote from their biological parents. The two children were violently hurled into the unsympathetic adult world with its strict disciplinary measures: while the adults had to be addressed formally and politely, children had to be obedient and grateful. They should not raise their eyes on speaking to their elders and had to speak politely and very softly, harboring a belief that "an impudent child was detested by God and a shame to its parents and could bring destruction to its house and line" (28). Because of these rigid regulations, Maya and Bailey had chores to perform at home and in Gram's store. The moment they misbehaved; they were prone to severe corporal punishment. In a childish remark, young Angelou refers to the possibility of their being pushed into the red heater by Uncle Willie or whipped by Gram's switch she used to keep behind the bedroom "for emergencies" to wake up "the offender with a few aptly placed burning remains" (27).

Recounting her early childhood, young Angelou felt imprisoned in her ugly, dark body. She soon came to be aware of a divided self-resulting primarily from a clash with her sordid reality. Although Stamps was a tightly-knit location based on black solidarity, it was a "color-coded" society entirely shackled in racial discrimination. The Negroes there, having the status of second-class citizenship, formed a down-trodden race denied any human civil or constitutional rights. They led abject conditions like poor education, unfair payments, few employment opportunities and constant threat of physical violence and intimidation by their white superiors. Angelou terribly suffered in that antagonistic world. As a black girl, she faced "a bind of double jeopardy, being both black and female" (Inge 36). The oppressive white standards of beauty deeply hurt her self-esteem. Her initial moment of recognition engendered shame about her offensive, dark physical image. The demeaning realization of her being an ugly, black girl stifled in her loathsome body was doubled by her mental inability to recite the hymn at the church – a situation that aroused other children's "wiggling and giggling over (her) well-known forgetfulness" (1). Moreover, she sensed her incompetence to curb her urgent need to urinate. Losing control on both her body and mind, she ran away to pee and gain a fleeting, fake moment of release of her physical as well as mental agitation. Her subconscious mind was always beset by the quest for a better, alternate, fair, white self to mend a status wrongly determined by race and gender.

Adding insult to injury, fear of the white vengeance never abated. Young Angelou extremely suffered when the white kids called her lame uncle Willie by his first name. He also used to obey their orders around the store. More than once, her Gram had to lock him hidden inside for a whole night so as not to be lynched. Another example of black persecution lies in Bailey's story about a dead Negro. On going home, he stumbled on a corpse of a black man castrated, shot in the head while "wrapped in a sheet, all rolled up like a mummy ...bloating like a ball" (197). The body was ruthlessly knocked over on the stomach by a white man, very delighted at the accident. Gram Henderson's confrontation with a group of white, impudent girls was a true death-blow for Maya. They snickered at her Gram, aped her posture and mannerism, and one of them even did a handstand to humiliate her. In her turn, the old woman just sang her prayers and controlled her fury – a practical philosophy of seeming submission that hurt the child's ego. Gram's later clash with the white dentist Dr.Lincoln , who

refused to treat Maya because “ he’d rather put his hand in a dog’s mouth ” (192) than in a Negro’s , troubled her for long. Though Gram imposed more interest on the money she lent him, Maya was hardly satisfied. Her deliberate destruction of Mrs. Cullinan’s favorite dish for wrongly calling her “Mary” was an attempt to unleash her indignation and assert her individuality.

In that way, young Angelou strongly rebelled against the existing bigotry and oppression. At the church Revival meeting, she rejected the sermon about endurance that backed such beliefs like:

Charity is “simple”, “poor”, “plain” (128).

.....

The Negroes, (though social pariahs), had to ... bear up under this life of toil and cares, because a blessed home awaited them in the far-off byed and by (129).

.....

It was better to be meek and lowly, spat up and abused for this little time than to spend eternity frying in the fires of hell (131).

Despite her commiseration with her folks, Maya could not succumb to their helplessness and impotence. She held a realistic vision of their condition:

I thought them all hateful to have allowed themselves to be worked like oxen, and even more shameful to try to pretend that things were not as bad as they were ... Go to church in that cloud of weariness? ...The idea came to me that my people may be a race of masochists and that not only was it our fate to live the poorest, roughest life but we liked it like that (121).

.....

After all, they were needy and hungry and despised and dispossessed, and sinners the world over were in the driver ’s seat. How long, merciful father? How long? (132).

Life with her mother in St. Louis augmented once again her inferiority complex. Struck by her mother’s physical attractiveness and easy-going personality, the child thought her “too beautiful to have children” (60). She soon faced the threat of another adult, namely, Mr. Freeman – her mother’s boyfriend. Raped by him and forced to maintain silent lest he might murder Bailey, the man made her shudder, feel smothered and even long for death at the age of eight. Her wonder “if (he) died holding (her), how (she)would ever get free” (73) aroused her fear that she would not die unless he “wished it” (81) – a conviction that vividly displays her profound sense of physical and psychological entrapment as relating her life to him. Following the family’s discovery of the disaster, young Maya felt like a harlot out of shame. Her lie about the man’s prior attempts while testifying in court magnified her guilt and sense of responsibility for his murder, presumably by her angry uncles – a fact that explains her withdrawal from her depressing reality and muteness for five years. The misinterpretation of her silence by elders as “impuden(ce)” and “sullenness” (88) obliged her return to Stamps to gain a temporary respite. There, only Mrs. Flowers, the aristocratic neighbor, managed to heal her through reading literature to surmount her ordeal and restore self-confidence. Thus, her rejection was only countered by love.

Upon her recovery, young Angelou was in desperate need for affection and self-acceptance. Therefore, she got upset at Bailey’s romantic affairs that detached him from her, exactly like her missing parents. Furthermore, she challenged her father’s girlfriend and even hit her. During their vacation in New Mexico, her father let her down; he was drunk and got involved in affairs with other women. She had to drive his car alone in the darkness. Though running into another car, she was proud of her achievement. Now more apt to steer her life, she insisted on being the first black streetcar conductress to defy the black lack of power. Subsequently, she could transcend her personal and social limitations and proclaim her identity over the white hegemony – a breakthrough that justifies her advice to the young generations:

One of the first things that a young person must internalize; deep down in the blood and bones, is the understanding that although 'you may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated' (Tate7).

To chart her journey toward full autonomy, Angelou had first to break her inner cage. Worried of being lesbian, she yearned to feel desirable and quell any suspicions about her femininity – an urge that prompted her to experiment with one of her colleagues a brief, loveless, sexual liaison which entailed no pleasure, shared tenderness nor satisfaction and only turned to be of a long-lasting result; she ended up a teenage girl in charge of a child out of wedlock. Still, her son's birth granted her female wholeness to terminate her childhood and construct a new self-image as a single, unwed mother of a formidable character facing alone the vicissitudes of life. Though still entangled by racial and sexual oppression, her pride of having a boy "totally (her) possession" (288) intensifies her victory and sustains the overriding theme of human survival. Jeffrey M. Elliot in *Conversations with Maya Angelou* (1998 hailed her achievement as a person and a literary genius:)

She has defeated the demons of her past and her personal insecurities to produce a body of work that is both intensely personal and embracingly universal (vii).

### 3. Conclusion

Throughout Angelou's indictment of white tyranny, "exploration of the ugly specter of racism" (Braxton 5) is an ever-present theme that figures prominently. Her race as a Negro and gender as a girl prohibit her liberty and expose her to a shaky bittersweet childhood and adolescence. Though chained in her dark body and confining milieu, she could surpass her sense of personal and social shame and stimulate her quest for identity – as an individual regardless of sex or skin color – which is only externalized via her resilience and tender love for her son and herself. Though uncertain about the future, she feels able to thwart the shackles of her bleak universe and soar high to sing her anthem of freedom in a melody of her own to ultimately embark on a new phase in her life. Her statement "I speak to the black experience, but I am always talking about the human condition – about what we can endure, dream, fail at and still survive" (Matuz 23) denies her being a regional writer. Moreover, it identifies her with the new generation of Southern writers who "not only contributed to but also expanded the American literary tradition" (ibid.50).

### 4. Bibliography

- Braxton, Joanne M. *Symbolic Geography and Psychic Landscape : A Conversation with Maya Angelou*, OUP, 1998
- Inge, Tonette Bond, ed. *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*, University Alabama Press ,1990
- M. Elliot, Jeffrey, ed. *Conversations with Maya Angelou*. University Press of Mississippi ,1998
- Matuz, Roger. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Gale Research Inc . 1991
- McDowell, Deborah. *Quicksand and Passing (American Women Writers)* Rutgers University Press,1986
- Russell, Sendi. *Render Me My Song: African – American Women Writers from Slavery to the Present*. Pandora Press, 1990
- Tate, Claudia. *Black Women Writers at Work*. Continuum, 1993