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A STUDY OF QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN MAYA ANGELOU NOVEL *I KNOW WHY THE
CAGED BIRD SINGS*

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ABSTRACT

Maya Angelou is one of the first African American Woman who reveals her private life. Her autobiographies celebrate the richness of Black life that persists in the face of poverty and racial prejudice. The young Maya struggles against terrible odds to establish her identity as she grows up into a young woman. The present paper is a study of quest for identity in Maya Angelou's novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. *I Know Why the Caged Bird sings* is the first of five volume Maya Angelou's autobiography. This volume begins with Maya's childhood and ends with her giving birth to a baby boy.

INTRODUCTION

Maya's real name is Marguerite, and most of her family members call her Ritie. The fact that she chooses to go by Maya as an adult, a name given to her by her brother, Bailey, indicates the depth of love and admiration she holds for him. When Maya reunites with her mother and her mother's family in St. Louis at age eight, one of her uncle tells her the story of how she got this name. Thus, finding her family is connected with finding her name and her identity. Indeed, for African Americans in general, Maya notes, naming is a sensitive issue because it provides a sense of identity in a hostile world that aims to stereo type blacks and erase their individuality and identity. Consequently, given the predominance of pejoratives like *nigger* so often used to cut down blacks, Maya notes the danger associated with calling a black person anything that could be loosely interpreted as insulting. Besides the obvious fact that Mrs. Cullinan does not take the time to get Maya's name right in the first place, Mrs. Cullinan wishes to manipulate Maya's name for her own convenience, shortening it to Mary, illustrating that she cares very little about Maya's wishes or identity. Maya becomes enraged, and the incident inspires her to commit her first act of resistance.

The divergent experience which she confronts in her life, represents the stages of her spiritual growth and awareness. Her work echoes her conception of herself as human being and the survival strategies available to a black woman in America. During their growing up years, children struggle to find their personal place in society. It is difficult for children to find their place when they are given numerous advantages, but when a child is oppressed by their parents or grandparents, males in their life, and the dominant culture, the

road to achieving self-identity is fraught with enormous obstacles to overcome. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a triumph over formidable social obstacles and struggle to achieve a sense of identity and self-acceptance. Through the device of writing autobiography, two of the most significant issues she struggles with in her childhood and young adulthood are feeling ugly and awkward and never feeling attached to any place. Maya Angelou shared her quest for human individuality, identifying her personal struggle with the general conditions of the Black Americans, which take up role not only in relation to the Black Americans, but also in relation to the very idea of America. Her autobiographies celebrate the richness and vitality of Southern Black life that persist in the face of poverty and racial prejudice. Initially, her celebration of the Southern Black life is revealed through the portrait of the author's life as a black child in Arkansas of the 1930s in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Maya Angelou is one of the most respected African American women who has made her niche in the hearts of the people as an autobiographer, poet, dancer, film producer, television producer, playwright, actress, civil rights activist and film director par excellence.

Maya describes a very deep, intimate and painful knowledge that she was different than everyone else. She knew, from an early age, that she was part of a group of individuals that, for whatever reason, were seen as "less than". When she is a young child, she can recognize that she feels differently because of the colour of her skin and her lack of monetary wealth. Though Maya struggles with insecurity and displacement throughout her childhood, she has a remarkable number of strong female role models in her family and community. Momma, Vivian, Grandmother Baxter, and Bertha Flowers have very different personalities and views on life, but they all chart their own paths and manage to maintain their dignity and self-respect. None of them ever capitulates to racist indignities.

Maya also charts her own path, fighting to become the first black street car conductor in San Francisco, and she does so with the support and encouragement of her female predecessors. Maya notes at the end of Chapter 34 that the towering character of the black American woman should be seen as the predictable outcome of a hard-fought struggle. Many black women fall along the way. The ones who can weather the storm of sexism and racism obviously will shine with greatness. They have survived, and therefore by definition they are survivors.

Throughout her book, she admitted her true self. This sort of narration in black women writing was unprecedented. Women writers did not dare talk about their marginalized lives and conditions through central characters until the mid-twentieth century, but Maya Angelou took those stories to public notice.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou, the book tells about a growing up black girl in the American south in the 1930s and 1940s. Maya struggles with her youth. Her life in Stamps at the age of three and her four-year old brother are turned over to the care of their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, southern life in Stamps, Arkansas was filled with humiliation, violation, and displacement. These actions were exemplified for blacks by the fear of the three K, racial separation of the town, and the many incidents in belittling blacks.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the first of five volumes of Maya Angelou's autobiography, which cover the years from the early 1930's, up until about 1970. This volume begins with Maya's childhood and ends with her giving birth to a baby boy. The prologue and early chapters are largely introductory, giving the setting of the black culture, developing the main characters, and introducing the themes.

The heart of the book speaks of how different incidents in Angelou's life affected her and her struggles towards self-understanding and independence. Maya's rape, subsequent muteness, her interaction with Mrs. Flowers, mocking pro-white trash girls, her visit to the dentist, Maya's month living in a Junkyard, her struggle to become a San Francisco street-car conductor, doubt about her sex, her graduation, and accepting motherhood were the important events as they shaped her personality and cast her to the light of understanding about life.

Maya Angelou's thought-provoking memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* opened the doors to the readers to enter into her private world and gave them an insight into the failures and triumphs of her life. In her novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, writer Maya Angelou lined up the images of despair, pain, loneliness and the perpetual sufferings of her life in particular and her race in general as the members of the

black community. In this book she vividly narrates her experiences in various situations and a wide variety of people. She used the name of her book in a symbolic manner to make her identified as a bird in the cage singing in joy irrespective of the her caged status. In other words, she wanted to make it a point that in the final analysis she came to terms with life and learnt to take things as they were. In the latter part of the book, it was understood that even though she was restricted by circumstances as a bird is in the cage, she took things for granted and found joy in her setting or situations by changing her perception and attitude towards various situations. In her narration it was clear that she was victimized by one and all because of her unprivileged birth and upbringing as a black woman. She learnt to forgive her exploiters and tried to live a normal life. Her story spoke volumes about her unflinching faith in her identity and beauty of her race taking pride in being a coloured woman.

Maya Angelou suffered male dominance when they were forcibly raped at a young age. Mary Crow Dog was fifteen when a man of unspecified color raped her, and Maya Angelou was eight when her mother's boyfriend assaulted her. Besides sexual domination, experience mental and physical domination. She struggles with in her childhood and young adulthood are feeling ugly and never feeling attached to any place. As the novel is an autobiography, the story is told entirely in first person, and is told from the author's point of view. This point of view is important, since the book is an explanation of the events of the author's life. As such, she knows only what she thinks and feels throughout the book, and she can only suggest the motivations of the other characters. This helps keep the narration focused on how the actions and events in the novel shape and form the emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of the main character. Without the emotional aspects of Maya's own words, the impact of the scenarios presented would be less effective.

Marguerite Johnson is the primary character in the book, and the teller of her story. Maya has a rough life, bouncing between cities and parents, being molested at a very early age, becoming pregnant at an early age. Her mother and father originally send her to live with grandparents, as they don't have time in their busy lives to care for the children. She is raised until age seven by her father's mother who is a kind, strong black woman living in the South. Momma, as she is known, runs the only Black operated store in the small Southern town, and earns marginal respect for it, even as the whites discriminate against her. When her mother sends for her, Maya and her brother are forced to move to St. Louis Childhood as a black girl in the South. Maya is sent to Stamps, Arkansas, by her parents from Long Beach, California. Her parents do not have time for Maya and her brother Bailey. Maya is not accustomed to the discrimination of the South, but she soon learns about the deep differences between blacks and whites. However, her grandmother is one of the few store owners in town, and the only colored store owner. As a result, she is not only well respected by the blacks of the small community, but she is marginally respected by the whites. Therefore, Maya's experiences are different from many, even during the deepest part of the Depression.

This changes, however, when her father returns for Maya and her brother, taking them to live in St. Louis with their mother. Beautiful and part of a powerful family, their mother is the daughter of Grandmother Baxter, a powerful nearly-white woman. The family has power over police as well as other local crime families, and Maya admits she loves the dangerous life. However, it is in this life that Maya, at age eight, is raped by her mother's boyfriend. When the family discovers her secret, they kill the man after he is released from jail. Maya stops speaking to anyone but Bailey, and the two are shipped back to Stamps once again. Maya continues to develop and to experience the low level discrimination common in the South, from dentists who won't treat her because of her skin color to daily struggles with whites. After Bailey is harassed by white police, the children are shipped back to their parents who are in California.

It is during World War II and their mother's marriage to a powerful businessman that Maya learns about the Black underground. But, she also learns about love and respect, as her new step-father is a kind and caring man. Then, she is sent to live with her father for a summer, and she again learns how selfish people can be. Her father finds escape from his girlfriend in a Mexican bar with prostitutes, dragging his young daughter with him. Too drunk to drive, Maya is forced to attempt to take him home. She crashes the car at the Mexican border. Returning home, Maya is cut open by her father's girlfriend and sent to stay with friends. After running away, she finds herself in a junkyard community with other homeless youths. It is here she learns tolerance,

brotherhood, and community. After a month, she returns to her mother and discovers that her time away has made her life far less exciting. Bailey soon leaves the house to take a position with the railroad, and Maya finds herself heavily discriminated against when trying to find work. She fights against the city rail system. Eventually, she becomes the first black employee of the San Francisco street car system.

Over the next year, Maya realizes she is still fighting against the "normal" life of those around her, as her experiences have aged her considerably beyond her peers. She finds herself confused by her maturation into womanhood. Maya takes a local lover as her first encounter, she find herself pregnant. Maya pushes forward, completing her high school education and giving birth only two weeks later. Maya is terrified once her child is born, but her own mother teaches her that being a mother is instinctual and that she can only succeed.

I Know Why the Caged Bird sings is an insightful look into the life of a beloved poet who draws strength, encouragement, and love from her exciting childhood. Although certainly disadvantaged and troubled, Maya uses her childhood to push herself forward. Her life is proof that with faith, love, and acceptance, one can overcome anything.

At the end of the story, though she found no mission or destination for her life, she realized her innocence and swore not to give up her struggle. As a result she could come out from the crisis of identity.

Maya Angelou's first two autobiographical works, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* created a unique place in black autobiographical tradition, by their ability through circumspectly fashioned form to measure the vulnerabilities and the intrinsic grandeur of black folk and cultural traditions. She went into the peculiar mission of the creative and contradictory self. The autobiographies reveal the author's strong appetite for the ultimate existence, and accepting the bitter realities in life with lion-heartedness. The psychological phenomenon of Maya Angelou made her a distinguished personality in the course of her divergent experiences. She blamed neither the society nor the family institution for her suffering and critical situations, whereas many great black authors neglected this aspect and projected it negatively Maya Angelou shared her quest for human individuality, identifying her personal struggle with the general conditions of the Black Americans, which made her play a representative role not only in relation to Black Americans, but also in relation to the very idea of America. Maya struggles against terrible odds to establish her identity as she grows up into a young woman. Her autobiographies celebrate the richness and vitality of Southern Black life and the sense of community that persists in the face of poverty and racial prejudice.

Maya Angelou moves to the beginning of her growth, constructing her own identity. Through the influence of the woman in her life, she actively confronts issues of race and institutions of power as well as herself after her "death" that occurs after rape and learns to accept herself as an African American southern woman.

CONCLUSION

The Writing of Maya Angelou, a black woman autobiography, depicts her anguish as a poor southern girl devoid of love and opportunities in the so called prosperous, promising land. Her quest for identity gradual realization and recognition of black beauty and self- acceptance of black womanhood as well as motherhood are also significant portrayed in her writings. In fact, she is one of the first African American woman who publicity discuss private.

According to Angelou, the African American Woman epitomizes the strong-will to survive without losing empathy and compassion. She herself, promoted the archetypal black female representative for black female inclusiveness. Her greatest legacy lies in her ability to infuse universality into her experience through her literary works, especially her elevation of racial and gender concerns. Her books continue to be studied in American Studies and Women's Studies.

A study of Maya Angelou's autobiographical works reveals that Maya Angelou's main objective is not only to narrate her story of triumph at the personal level but also to voice the trail and tribulations of African American women in the backdrop of racial and gender discrimination even in the advanced west. In her endeavour, she succeeded to document the social history of her fellow women and social economic conditions of the west.

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