

Research Article

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## Quest for Identity-Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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### Abstract

#### Keywords

Black American,  
Alienation,  
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Maya Angelou tries to discover her individuality, identifying her trials and tribulations with the general conditions of the Black Americans in relation to the Black Americans and America. Her autobiographies celebrate the richness of Black life that persist in the face of poverty and racial prejudice. This 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*. She evokes self reflection. She feels proud to be known as the renowned Renaissance woman called Maya Angelou. The hardships endured by her during her childhood has been a driving force in reaching the zenith and enjoying success. Maya Angelou is one of the most respected African American women, an autobiographer, poet, dancer, film producer, television producer, playwright, actress, civil rights activist and film director par excellence. The writings of Maya Angelou (Marguerite Annie Johnson) a black woman autobiographer, depict her anguish as a poor southern black girl devoid of love and opportunities in the so called prosperous, promising land. Her quest for identity gradually helps her to recognize her black beauty and self-acceptance of black womanhood as well as motherhood. She is one of the first African American women who reveals her private life. 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 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.

### Introduction

The book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* portrays the different incidents in Angelou's life that affected her and helped her to understand and liberate herself from the shackles of the society. 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 incidents that shaped her personality and paved the path to understand life. Throughout her book, she admits her

true self. Women writers do not dare talk about their marginalized lives and conditions through central characters until the mid-twentieth century, but Maya Angelou takes the stories to public notice. The power of her pen is the ultimate product of Maya's personality. Maya is no longer ashamed of her race or sex, instead she is proud and gains confidence as a "Negro female". Her struggle and triumph over prejudices, and barriers like racism, sexism, personal desolation, loneliness, and low self-image of herself illuminate her strength and beauty.

Maya Angelou's thought-provoking autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* opens the doors to the readers to enter into her private world and gives them an insight into the failures and triumphs of her life. In her novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, writer Maya Angelou exposes the despair, pain, loneliness and the perpetual sufferings of her life in particular and her race in general as the members of the black community. She vividly narrates her experiences in various situations and to a wide variety of people. The title of the book suggests that in spite of her caged status, she sings in the cage. In other words, she wants to make it a point that in the final analysis she comes to terms with life and learns to take things as they are. In the latter part of the book, it is understood that even though she is restricted by circumstances as a bird is in the cage, she takes things for granted and finds joy in her setting or situations by changing her perception and attitude towards various situations. She is victimized by one and all because of her unprivileged birth and upbringing as a black woman. She learns to forgive her exploiters and tries to live a normal life. Her story speaks volumes about her unflinching faith in her identity and her strong appetite for the ultimate existence amidst the bitter realities in life.

The psychological phenomenon of Maya Angelou made her a distinguished personality in the course of her divergent experiences. She blames neither the society nor the family institution for her suffering and critical situations. Through the device of writing autobiography, Maya Angelou shares her quest for human individuality, identifying her personal struggle with the general conditions of the Black Americans, which makes her play a representative role not only in relation to Black Americans, but also in relation to the very idea of America. 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. Initially, her celebration of 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's serial autobiography recaptures her own subjective experiences. Throughout her work, she describes the personal, social, cultural, and historical influences which shaped her life and personality. She explores herself and individual identity and her relationship with the family, the community and the world. Of course, the divergent experiences which she confronts in her life represents the stages of her spiritual growth and awareness. Her study of autobiography is significant as it offers her deep insights into personal

and group experience in America. Her work echoes her conception of herself as a human being and the survival strategies available to a black woman in America.

Angelou perceives her work as an opportunity for her readers to peer into her world and reflects on their own worlds, a point of self-reflection that would engage one to observe oneself and concurrently to observe humanity. She wages her own revolution and becomes a paradigm to her readers to survive and transcend a socially constructed ideology designed to control self-understanding and socio-economic mobility.

It is no doubt that because of Angelou's efforts, the African American woman has gained wider respectability and greater reception. Her vividness and veracity have moved the impetus to the blacks to struggle for equality. She has richly recorded the African American feminine experience from the early days of the Civil Rights Movement to the present day. In her lectures, Angelou brings to public attention the countless and important contributions that African Americans have made to American culture and literature. According to Angelou, the African American Woman epitomizes the strong-will to survive without losing empathy and compassion. She herself, promotes 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 classes. A study of Maya Angelou's autobiographical works reveal 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.

Two of the most significant issues she struggles with in her childhood and young adulthood is feeling ugly and awkward and never feeling attached to one place. First, Maya imagines that though people judge her unfairly by her awkward looks, they will be surprised one day when her true self emerges. She equates true self to be an angel in a fairy tale, a beautiful, blond white girl. This signifies the racism rampant in the society in which she grows up that has infiltrated her mind. Second, uprooted and sent away from her parents at age three, Maya has trouble throughout her life feeling that she belongs

anywhere. Her sense of displacement may stem in part from the fact that black people were not considered full-fledged Americans, but primarily she feels abandoned by her family. When she and Bailey arrive in Stamps, the note posted on their bodies is not addressed to Annie Henderson, but rather "To Whom It May Concern."

The childish voice interspersed throughout Angelou's adult reflections suggests that she is probably five or six years old at the time of the opening scene. Growing up as a black girl in the South is like putting a razor to one's throat, but, even worse, when that black girl feels alienated from her own black community, her sense of displacement is like the rust on the razor, making life even more unbearable. She feels that her displacement is an unnecessary insult. Since the opening scene shows that Angelou was aware of her displacement, she takes us through a journey of her childhood full of such extra insults. Nevertheless, it is significant that Maya manages to escape the critical, mocking church community and laugh about her liberation, even though she knows that she will be punished for it. Maya's escape foreshadows her eventual overcoming of the limitations of her childhood.

Maya's experiences in the Store tell much about black rural small-town life during the 1930s. Maya describes the plight of the cotton pickers', describing their beleaguered bodies, their torn clothes, and their wearied faces when returning from the fields. Moreover, though Stamps is so thoroughly segregated that, as a child, Maya feels she hardly knows what white people look like, the social and economic effects of segregation profoundly affect Maya, her family, and her experiences. Against the backdrop of such terrifying events, Maya's grandmother Momma keeps her faith and self-respect, providing an influential example for Maya and Bailey. From the beginning, Momma and Bailey provide her with a loving, respectful foundation that will support her in the future.

As young children, Maya and Bailey struggle with the pain of having been rejected and abandoned by their parents. Maya also finds herself tormented by the belief that she is an ugly child who will never measure up to genteel, white girls. She does not feel equal to other black children. One Easter Sunday, Maya is unable to finish reciting a poem in church, and self-consciously feeling ridiculed and a failure, Maya races from the church crying, laughing, and wetting herself. Bailey sticks up for Maya when people actually make fun of her to her face, wielding his charisma to put others in their place.

Momma survived the odds stacked against her and became a successful businesswoman. She saved the Store in the Great Depression while many white businesses failed all over the country. In Angelou's autobiography, Momma emerges as a strong, determined survivor. Momma chooses her battles well. In what is known as the Great Migration, between one and two million black farmers left the South from 1914 to 1930 in search of work in northern cities, where factory owners promised but never provided high-wage jobs. The black migration from the rural countryside to the cities divided blacks from their heritage and their roots, stranding them in a world where, it seemed, one had to look, talk, and act white in order to succeed.

Maya's mother Vivian lives a wild life working in gambling parlors. One morning Vivian's live-in boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, sexually molests Maya, and he later rapes her. They go to court and afterward Mr. Freeman is violently murdered, probably by some of the underground criminal associates of Maya's family. In the aftermath of these events, Maya endures the guilt and shame of having been sexually abused. She also believes that she bears responsibility for Mr. Freeman's death because she denied in court that he had molested her prior to the rape and remains silent. Maya and Bailey return to Stamps to live with Momma. Momma manages to break through Maya's silence by introducing her to Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a kind, educated woman who tells Maya to read works of literature out loud, giving her books of poetry that help her to regain her voice.

Maya highlights the idea that even though blacks suffer from racism and oppression, they remain individuals who can inflict suffering on other people. It is highly probable that some of the Baxter family's associates in the criminal underground—if not Maya's uncles themselves—killed Mr. Freeman. When the policeman casually reports that Mr. Freeman has been beaten to death, Grandmother Baxter tells the children never to mention Mr. Freeman's name or what they have heard about his death. Afterward, Maya's family viciously chastises her for being silent.

Even though many of the adults in Maya's life show their flaws, Maya continues to receive attention and care from others. The fact that Maya and Bailey have begun to grow naturally apart perhaps exacerbates Maya's isolation and confusion, but Bailey remains the most important person in her life. He persuades her to reveal the identity of the rapist, and his tearful reaction to learning that the man who lived with him raped Maya reveals the loving support he gives her. Bailey does not betray her trust. He never blames her for the rape or for

their sudden return to Stamps. Once there, Mrs. Flowers offers Maya a way to speak without fear. Maya welcomes their return to Stamps because life there is predictable, but both Maya's silence and a general silence regarding the rape persist, and she continues to carry her unarticulated burden of guilt. Reading aloud from books or reciting poems with Mrs. Flowers allows Maya to speak through the words of others. Maya considers Mrs. Flowers a hero and thus shows that she has begun to forget, to a certain extent, the fact that books portray only males as heroes.

Maya describes numerous other instances of subtle black resistance to racism in these chapters. The black southern church is an avenue for subversive resistance. At the revival, the preacher gives a sermon that criticizes white power. His sermon against greedy, self-righteous employers clearly attacks white farmers for paying miserable wages to black field labor. Movies and other popular culture of the 1930s disseminate demeaning racial stereotypes of blacks. Despite recognizing the personally empowering nature of these instances of resistance, Maya's descriptions illustrate that such resistance rarely affects great change, even within the African-American community. Instead, such resistance often replaces their short-lived happiness by crushing realities. The individual revival members only see the differences and suffer from despair. Rather than seeing the honky-tonk as another form of subtle empowerment, the church community sees it as a burden.

The black community's excitement over the graduation comes from the fact that they have had to fight very hard to receive even a modicum of education. Black activists of earlier generations had fought to build schools for black children. Before emancipation, educational opportunities for African-Americans were rare, especially in the South. After emancipation, black Americans faced hostility toward their education from their former masters. In Stamps, the graduating eighth-grade and high-school classes surmount the pressures of poverty and racism to earn their diplomas. Donleavy's speech indicates that their achievements in education are worthless and misdirected. The white school has received tangible improvements aimed at increasing and bettering the opportunities for white students in science and art, but Donleavy's description of bragging about the college athletes from their school suggests, at best, that the black schools do not receive tangible improvements like the science equipment and new art teacher at the white school. Unfortunately, Donleavy's remarks shame the black children into bowing their heads and thinking that they should not value their education and their graduation. Maya remarks that

Donleavy "exposed" them. Even more insulting, Donleavy expects the students and their parents to be grateful to him for his pathetic efforts.

Momma's confrontation with Dr. Lincoln introduces the important idea of the ethics of necessity in Maya's autobiography. Maya imagines that Momma battles Dr. Lincoln and brings him to his knees, but in reality Momma compromises her own sense of ethics in order to extract money from Dr. Lincoln. Momma admits that it is wrong to demand interest on a loan retroactively. To a certain extent, Maya's dire situation spurred Momma to demand the interest. The ethics of necessity, however, applies more to the fact that Momma wants Dr. Lincoln to pay for his evil, racist refusal to treat Maya, and for his ingratitude toward the humane and generous black woman (Momma) who saved his practice with her money. Momma does not really consider her compromise to be a bad thing, for she and Willie laugh about the incident while discussing it. The ethics of necessity by which blacks justify lying or even illegal actions to achieve retribution toward whites continues to operate in the autobiography, particularly in San Francisco, when Maya meets Daddy Clidell's con-artist friends. It differs greatly, however, from the type of serious criminal activity exhibited by Maya's family in St. Louis.

Momma's decision to take Bailey and Maya to California exemplifies her practical nature as well. This time, however, Momma does not laugh while making this sacrifice. In this case, she shows her quiet bravery. She loves her grandchildren so much that she decides to part with them. She chooses to save them from further ugly encounters with racist Southern whites. Although she has never before travelled more than fifty miles from her place of birth, Momma leaves Willie and her business to live in Los Angeles for six months while her grandchildren settle into their new life. The calm with which she makes the abrupt change shows a steely, resourceful character.

Maya's reversal from disgust to pride during the graduation shows that she has begun to take serious pride in being a member of a resilient black community. Donleavy's speech makes Maya terribly angry, to the point where she imagines a retelling of history that is just as murderous and violent toward white people as toward blacks. Not even Henry Reed's beautiful speech can pull Maya out of her pessimism. However, when Henry invokes the Negro National Anthem, he reminds the audience, his fellow graduates, and eventually Maya that they should retain their pride in themselves and their abilities. Maya comes to realize that other black people have worked hard to provide her with the opportunity to

graduate from school. Perhaps more important to Maya's development, given her love for literature and poetry, she comes to understand that blacks have written poetry and literature in celebration of black identity and achievement. Maya remarks that, before, she paid attention only to Patrick Henry and other white freedom fighters. Now, she listens for the first time to the words of James Weldon Johnson's inspirational song "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" and no longer considers herself just a member of the graduating class, but also a member of "the wonderful, beautiful Negro race." As an adult looking back, Maya thanks black artists and poets for helping her to sustain her hope and realize her black pride in the midst of disappointment and discouragement.

San Francisco represents an entirely different world from the rural South. Maya attends an unsegregated school. Her education becomes more varied with the addition of drama and dance to her studies. As opposed to the monotony of life in the South, San Francisco undergoes constant change, especially due to the upheaval of the war. Similar to the Great Migration in the East, the defense industry's factories went into full swing in California during the war, and they employed willing blacks and whites alike, especially since the Japanese population had been moved unjustly to internment camps. This harrowing scene of constant displacement becomes, somewhat ironically, the first place where Maya feels a sense of belonging, giving her a new boldness and an awareness of herself. Maya has never felt that she belongs anywhere before, and the constant scene of changing faces in wartime San Francisco—the cyclical wave of newcomers—wards off her own sense of alienation and isolation.

Maya's descriptions of a multiracial apartment building and an unsegregated school might lead one to think that racial relations were not as tense as they were in the South, but she takes care to explain that this was not the case. The outer face of San Francisco did not show the tumult within. Rural whites brought their prejudices with them to the city. Rural blacks came to the city with their distrust of white people, cultivated through years of negative experiences. In the South, blacks and poor whites lived and worked on unequal, opposite sides of the racial divide. In San Francisco, they worked side by side in the war industry.

In San Francisco, Maya encounters a more brash form of resistance to racial inequality. Whereas Momma thought it sinful yet necessary to insist that Dr. Lincoln pay ten dollars in interest when she had not asked for it initially, Daddy Clidell's friends lie and cheat to make \$40,000 off white men. Momma's quiet rebellions were replaced

by the financially rewarding methods of Daddy Clidell's friends, who catered to racial stereotypes in order to lure racist whites into their con games. They learned to turn white prejudice into a liability for whites. Despite the difference between Momma and the con-men's methods, Maya shows that in both cases the ethical standard is based on necessity and justifies the means used to produce change. The standard of ethics differs for the black community because if people cannot compete equally in society, they must find ways to advance by manipulating the system. Fair play ceased to have moral value when the rules of the game proved unfair. For the most part, the cotton-field laborers in Stamps accepted their difficult existence with resignation. Their resistance came in the form of personal empowerment and psychological stamina. The wartime generation, however, gained a sense of entitlement and wielded its creative powers to act upon it.

Nearly every scene in these chapters illustrates Maya's blossoming awareness of, and her love and respect for, herself. Maya's emboldened sense of self shines forth in her impulsive decision to drive the car back to the U.S. from Mexico. Even though she has an accident, she says that she felt better than at any other time in her life. Maya is so confident in herself and proud of her achievement that she declares that she did not even need her father's praise at first, even though she becomes angry when he continues to ignore her accomplishment. When Big Bailey asks Maya about her opinion of Dolores, Maya remarks upon Dolores's pettiness and says that Dolores does not like her based upon her physical appearance. After overhearing the argument between Big Bailey and Dolores, Maya feels heroic and merciful when she tries to console Dolores. Maya has changed from a self-conscious and nervous girl to a defiant young woman, perhaps remaking herself in the image of the strong women who have influenced her. Indeed, besides the obvious parallels to Momma's dignified nature, Maya acts very much like Vivian, particularly when she warns Dolores before slapping her in the same way that Vivian warned her partner before shooting him.

In these chapters, Maya compares Big Bailey's lack of paternal graces with Daddy Clidell's strength as a father figure. Maya's description of Big Bailey's reaction to the confrontation and the injury hints at sarcasm and shows that she considers Big Bailey to be utterly selfish, even if he comes across as a likable character. He chooses to take Maya to a friend for treatment of her wound instead of a doctor because he wants to avoid personal embarrassment. He does not directly ask Maya to keep quiet about the incident, but he implies that she should do so, explaining how a scandal could damage

his reputation. As if speaking for Big Bailey but with a melodramatic flare, Maya asks the reader rhetorically, "Could I imagine the scandal if people found out that his, Bailey Johnson's, daughter had been cut by his lady friend?" She ironically exaggerates the response to her question by saying that all black people in the city would hang their heads in shame if Big Bailey's troubles became known publicly. Daddy Clidell, on the other hand, shows his pride when people think that Maya is his biological daughter. He has no insecurities to hide and no superiority to flaunt. As a result, he gives Maya affection and respect, and she considers him the first real father figure in her life.

The final chapters of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* detail Maya's rapid journey into adulthood. Maya experiences important intellectual growth while staying in the junkyard. The experience in the junkyard also shows that Maya's growing sense of independence and confidence in herself has begun to coalesce and intensify. Only days before, she surprised herself by driving the car in Mexico, and now she strikes out on her own to spend a month in a junkyard living in a responsibly managed communal society. The intensity of her poise and self-assurance fuels her quest for the position on the streetcar when she returns home to San Francisco. Other employers desperately seek laborers at higher wages without discrimination, yet Maya refuses to give up the job she has chosen. At age fifteen, she has developed a surprising adult will. Once hired, she ceases to live in a world demarcated by black neighborhoods and continues to rush headlong into the larger world. Nevertheless, Maya's most rapid affirmation of her induction into the world of adulthood, the birth of her baby boy, also symbolizes the fact that Maya is still a child in many ways. The final chapter details Maya's sensual awakening, not unlike the awakening of a typical adolescent, complete with fears and questions about sex and appearance. Angelou specifically references her youthful innocence when she uses the phrase "had I been older" in describing the incident with her classmate's beautiful breasts.

Just as Maya's rape appeared to be a direct result of her displacement, in some ways Maya's pregnancy results from her continued displacement from her mother Vivian. Vivian certainly takes Maya seriously when Maya questions her about sex. Vivian does not, however, take an active interest in finding out whether she has answered all of Maya's questions, thinking that everything will be all right once Maya washes her face, has a glass of milk, and returns to sleep. The autobiography ends, however, with an overwhelmingly positive picture of Vivian. Vivian makes mistakes along the way, but she nevertheless survives with the strength

and honesty that provide sustenance for and rub off on Maya in the end. When Maya becomes pregnant, Vivian supports and encourages her without condemnation, and she gives Maya her first and most important lesson about trusting her maternal instincts. Maya admires her unflinching honesty, her strength, and her caring nature, despite her frequent fumbling as a parent.

Angelou places both Vivian and even herself within the tradition of black women with strong characters and honorable survival mechanisms. Angelou says she often hears people react to the formidable character of black women in America as if they are surprised or offended. This, in turn, surprises Angelou. She feels that black women must struggle so much to survive that, when they do, their formidable character is predictable. She goes on to say that this inevitable strength of character should be respected if not accepted with enthusiasm. Maya demonstrates that the universal struggles of adolescence combine with the stresses of race and gender to make black women's struggles all the more challenging.

During these years in Stamps, Maya becomes aware of both the fragility and the strength of her community. She attends a church revival during which a priest preaches implicitly against white hypocrisy through his sermon on charity. The spiritual strength gained during the sermon soon dissipates as the revival crowd walks home past the honky-tonk party. Maya also observes the entire community listening to the Joe Louis heavyweight championship boxing match, desperately longing for him to defend his title against his white opponent.

Maya endures several appalling incidents that teach her about the insidious nature of racism. At age ten, Maya takes a job for a white woman who calls Maya "Mary" for her own convenience. Maya becomes enraged and retaliates by breaking the woman's fine china. At Maya's eighth grade graduation, a white speaker devastates the proud community by explaining that black students are expected to become only athletes or servants. When Maya gets a rotten tooth, Momma takes her to the only dentist in Stamps, a white man who insults her, saying he'd rather place his hand in a dog's mouth than in hers. The last straw comes when Bailey encounters a dead, rotting black man and witnesses a white man's satisfaction at seeing the body. Momma begins to fear for the children's well-being and saves money to bring them to Vivian, who now lives in California.

When Maya is thirteen, the family moves to live with Vivian in Los Angeles and then in Oakland, California. When Vivian marries Daddy Clidell, a positive father

figure, they move with him to San Francisco, the first city where Maya feels at home. She spends one summer with her father, Big Bailey, in Los Angeles and has to put up with his cruel indifference and his hostile girlfriend, Dolores. After Dolores cuts her in a fight, Maya runs away and lives for a month with a group of homeless teenagers in a junkyard. She returns to San Francisco strong and self-assured. She defies racist hiring policies in wartime San Francisco to become the first black streetcar conductor at age fifteen. At sixteen, she hides her pregnancy from her mother and stepfather for eight months and graduates from high school. The account ends as Maya begins to feel confident as a mother to her newborn son.

## Conclusion

Maya compares herself, her black female role models, and even her entire race to the bird who is locked in a cage but nevertheless sings. Maya implies that by reading her autobiography, the reader will come to understand why the bird sings despite being locked up in a cage. At the same time, the title implies the possibility that the reason why the caged bird sings could be a secret, one that Maya holds close inside her, away from the tampering, meddling forces of the prison master. We can guess why the bird sings—perhaps to break free, perhaps to provide solace to itself, perhaps because its voice is its only means of action or communication, or perhaps because the bird feels joy knowing something others do not. Maya’s widely varied and insightful depiction of the African-American struggle affords many possible reasons.

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