

Ego Resistance, Oppression and Resilience of Self Esteem in “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” By Maya Angelou

Dr. Usha Jain^a and Nobert Solomon^b

^aAsst. Professor, S.A.B.V. Govt. Arts and Commerce College Indore, M.P

^bPh.D. Scholar, D.A.V.V Indore

Accepted 04 April 2014, Available online 25 April 2014, Vol.2 (March/April 2014 issue)

Abstract

Black woman in America experiences threefold strong-arming of race, sex and class. In the United States the combat for equality, mainly in the southern states, has been long and difficult, from the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's to the political deliberations still going on today. This Research will try to uplift the curtain on those harsh realities and will make readers as well as society familiar with the impulsive issues like racism, Prejudices with in society, colonial history and condition of Blacks in White Society. A thorough study on the authors work will present a realistic account of the socio-economic and cultural condition of the past, making the current generation acclimatize with the life and the times of the earlier generation and its influence on the contemporary life and to develop a sense of respect for the Women in their respective arenas and treat them with equality. The current research paper voices the struggled repression from a racist and Chauvinist society; as how a black women attempted to create not only racial equality but also gender equality through her undaunted audacity and forbearance. The study focuses on Angelou's phenomena of resistance in the background of post colonialism through exploring the current means by which people formulate their racial identity. Her Work is a vocalization of the struggle for national, racial, and Self-identity; she addresses the irreconcilable difference between black and white community, feminism and masculinity, inferiority and superiority complex in the governing male dominated society. The odyssey of feminine experiences throughout the novel enables the researcher to discover the experiences of resistance and courage in the face of adversity ;Failure is inescapable but it is quite necessary to boost one -self again and one should always be willing "To Strike, to seek to find but not to Yield."

Keywords: Resilience, Forbearance, Ego resistance and Chauvinist etc.

Maya Angelou winner of Pulitzer Prize for her first volume of autobiography-*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is one of the momentous authors who speak volume in conveying Blacks' experience in America. "Am I woman first, or Am I black first?" Communally and constitutionally the cultural and gender environment of the country has changed, but on the horizon it has further got aggravated rather than getting ameliorated and subdued. First wave of feminism was restricted only to the suffrage movement and at the outset of the feminist movement it never acknowledged the racial prejudice that black women faced but identified with the biases that all the women faced. Second wave of feminism draws our attention to a much broader perspective which spoke about Family, workplace, sexuality, legal inequalities, reproductive rights and Women liberation.

Angelou also invites a parallelism to Simone De Beauvoir who had a significant influence on feminist existentialism and Feminist theory; she also speaks about *the pervasiveness, intensity and mysteriousness of the*

history of women's oppression in her notable volume "Second Sex."

The Afro-American feminist-marginalized experience has been visualized in many of the postmodern works, but how it is transported, communicated and asserted are questions to be answered in detail. The present paper is a fervent effort to find answers to such questions. The Autobiography has been selected keeping with the best of interest of the research question and concentrates briefly on the study and attentions primarily on the experiences of ostracized women as depicted in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Maya finds herself in a similar plight to that of a caged bird which yearns, longs and craves for freedom and uses the allegory of a bird who struggles to escape its cage from incarceration of racism and oppression. The caged bird also resembles to the peacock which looks beautiful when it spreads its wing and dance but on the other hand it also resonates of the sad anecdote of being unhappy, alone and segregated when the peacock looks at its ugly feet:

The caged bird sings
with fearful trill
of the things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. (Final Stanza of the Poem, *I Know Why the caged Bird sings*)

Angelou wants to break all the obstacles and shackles of the society which is beset by the narrow domestic walls of sex, caste, and racism. Like great Noble Laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore, she also wants to take a fresh breath of air in an environment equal both for men and women. Angelou envisages the barrier free world like Rabindranath Tagore:

"Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls." (Tagore, *Where the Mind is Without Fear*- Lines 3-4)

Angelou's autobiography is a reflection on the subservient status of a Woman as a Second sex and as a recluse. Her broodings on how women come across assorted degrees of subjugation depending on their customs, socio-economic class, and the Nation in which they reside is an eye opener. She highlights different types of repressions that Black women in America surface, Blacks largely gets subjected to the tripartite force of racism, chauvinism and classism. Racial prejudice and Negro resistance, ignorance, sense of worth, segregation, sexual abuse and displacement are the major topics addressed in the coming fragments. Maya has proven herself as an emblematic appeal for every Black girl growing up in America, goes from being a victim of racism with a lowliness complex to a self-aware individual.

Maya Angelou Opines

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 kept thinking what about that time? What were the people around Maya doing? I used the central figure-myself-as a focus to show how one person can make it through those times. (Tate, C (1999). "Maya Angelou: An Interview." In Braxton, J.M. New York: Oxford University Press, 153)

Maya Angelou realistically illustrates her life experience as a teenager and portrays the situation and experiences she came across as sexual abuse, racial discrimination, divorce of her parents, and the conflict with her step mother and even teenage pregnancy. With the support of her mother she learnt how to take care of her son. Angelou's biography may serve as an example of how an

African American girl attempted to survive against male prejudices at social and psychological levels, even in absence of any power and authority and endured all the hardship with her positive zeal and confidence. In her own words "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, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*6). The author is concerned with the question of what it means to be a Black female in America. Her progression as a story writer is based on certain social clout which attacks the Black woman with unacquainted intensity and force.

Parenting arrived to Maya Angelou at the age of seventeen, and she at her teenage faced all impediments to raise her baby. In addition to her duty at home, Maya Shares her own experience as a black mother where apart from handling both Productive and reproductive roles, she also worked as a prostitute and also as a bar servant to raise her child; She was even denied of the govt. job which she subsequently achieved post multiple follow ups. Angelou dispels the domineering conception of motherhood for working class women. By doing so, she creates a stimulus in the heart of white and Black women who face similar biases. The fundamental issue is about the delineation of experiences of Black women in especially southern America where the author herself was born. Young age familiarity is demonstrated by the blues opening, and all the subsequent chapters lead readers in to the ability of overcoming disarticulation and other inequalities.

Lift ev'ry voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty; ..." [...]
"Stony the road we trod
Bitter the chastening rod
Felt in the days when hope, unborn, had died.
Yet with a steady beat
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
(Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*178-179)

Angelou explores the subjects like identity, rape, racism, and literacy as it contains a sequence of struggles and harassments. With progression in the steady state of life she experiences the more blatant instances of racism, such as a white speaker's haughty statement at her eighth-grade graduation, her white boss's assertion on calling her Mary, and a white dentist's refusal to treat her. Her personal displacement repeats the larger social force that banishes black all across the country. Plagued by the triple conflict of racism, sexism, and power, Maya is depreciated and debilitated at every turn, making her unable to acclimatize at one dwelling, between the ages of 3 to 16 she is made to shuttle around seven different homes. The categorization she describes leads the protagonist from helpless rage and resentment to forms of refined confrontation. The nature of Negro resistance

she observed in the Society was mainly divided in two forms: subtle resistance and active protest. The foundation of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* envisages these two forms of conflict against racism separately. It begins with unreceptive protest against maltreatment of whites followed by evident hostility from Blacks against racial acts. "The Black Female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of Male Prejudice, White illogical hate and black lack of power." (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*265).

Angelou firmly believed in the Divine creation of universe as it was based on the principle of equality but to her utter notice of what she faces, she finds that the selfish motif of human beings manipulated those powers and segregated them as per his own discretion and formulated their own Taboo without liaising to any Sect. What makes discrimination nastiest in her appeal was the dentist refusing to treat Maya in her acute pain without being obliged to the fact that her grandmother had helped him in the time of his dire need. He rejects to treat her austere toothache on account of her Black colour and refers her as Nigra and prefers to put his hand in a dog's mouth rather than treating a Black:

Annie?" "Yes, sir, Dentist Lincoln." He was choosing words the way people hunt for shells. "Annie, you know I don't treat nigra, colored people." "I know, Dentist Lincoln. But this here is just my little grandbaby, and she ain't gone be no trouble to you ..." "Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my Policy is I don't treat colored people... My policy ..." He let go of the door and stepped nearer Momma. The three of us were crowded on the small landing. "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's. (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*183-184).

Angelou expresses the emotional response of Afro Americans people who are living in the southern United States, as how they are deprived of good education, better job prospect along with the basic amenities, accommodation and proper medical treatment. With the existing segregation gambit and its empowerment to entail that Black people continue to be the less privileged ones and at any point of time they should not overcome the white people in terms of Social ladder and clout. Segregation, relocation and struggle to establish oneself in a different environment and in a different country as conversed in the novel and further in this paper are one of the governing experiences of Black women in America as Maya herself shuttled around seven different homes in between 3 to 16 years of her age: "Admittedly the training was not the same. While white girls learned waltz and sit gracefully with a tea cup balanced on their knees, we were lagging behind, learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge them." (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 101)

Women in America suffer dual peril from the white and the male hegemony. Angelou's representation of rape leaks the real grief of many Black American women and she being the victim succumbs and submits to the illicit lust of Mr. Freeman. From the moment she was abused, her sexual identity becomes a question as She gets confused between sex with love, she oscillates between womanhood and childhood, and do not know which way to choose. After this inhuman and heinous act the malevolent is released shortly from jail. The Depiction of Rape on the Psyche of the child is vividly elucidated through the content of the act as it is between a child who is ignorant, unformed, not a teenage and Mr. Freeman who already was in a relation with her mother for satisfying his carnal pleasures, cuckolds Maya by conniving as if he was playing with her and without explicating the intent of any lewdness:

We was just playing before." He released me enough to snatch down my bloomers, and then he dragged me closer to him. Turning 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." I could tell he meant what he said. I couldn't understand why he wanted to kill my brother. Neither of us had done anything to him. And then. 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, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*79)

Angelou transports her feeling of being raped by accepting the wrong done to her through her long silence of five years. Her decision not to open up of the deceit was owing to the fear of being highlighted and what repercussions the revelation would evoke amid the other family members. Time is the best healer and it is rightly said that Once lost always lost is not the true case for Chastity as nature has its own recuperative powers, though it heals the body but it leaves a scar on the psyche of the individual who keeps recollecting the moment which keeps questioning "Why me? And wants to erase it as a bad dream but cannot relinquish the stigmatization similarly like Lady Macbeth's guilt where she feels that All the perfume of Arabia shall not sweeten this little hand, her inner self and the sexual exploitation of her body is clearly elaborated and illustrated in the below Lines:

In those moments I decided that although Bailey loved me he couldn't help. I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey. Instinctively, or somehow, I knew that because I loved him so much I'd never hurt him, but if I talked to anyone else that person might die too. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the

Black fat slugs that only pretended. I had to stop talking. (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 84)

Her rape at a very tender age of eight exhibits the inner self of a Black woman who moves from a Childhood to an adolescence phase with a familiarity of being used and abused and herein suffering the Stigma in a male dominated society. The protagonist here addresses all the also wants to prevent it from happening to someone else, so that anyone who had been raped might gain understanding and not blame herself for it. She writes about being a Black American woman and also speaks about what it is like to be a human being and further echoes the principle of live to move on as this is how we are, what make us laugh, and this is how we fall and somehow, amazingly, stand up again.

Subsequently receiving the entitlements like nigger, Maya foresees the vulnerability of being called as a black individual and this could be anyways as insulting as not existing or existing but with no self-respect and in another case when suffering from Amnesia. Though it is quoted many a times that "What is thy in the name" but it is the very essence of our existence and Identity and if someone consciously changes our name then it is a Question Mark on Who we are versus the replaced identity. Maya's name gets altered easily by a white woman from 'Marguerite' to 'Mary' without her consent. The deed is totally harsh and inhuman on account of white people who do not commiserate and respect the black people and uses the metonym as per their own prerogatives without realizing as how this is going to disturb their Morale and their overall persona. Angelou demonstrates the racist practice of rechristening African-Americans; Marguerite Anne Johnson is the maiden name, Maya is the name given by her brother Bailey, and Margaret is given by Mrs. Cullinan who could not enunciate the name Marguerite. Angelou herself loved the name 'Maya', the name which is still in the minds of numerous voracious readers. It shows the lack of respect white people have for their servants as they consider themselves as a superior race and hence it was obvious for Maya not liking to be called out by her name after facing the insult and stigma of being a Black. It gave her the inferior feeling that white people did not treat her equally and it also reminisce her of the slavery period when Blacks were named at the whims and fancies of their masters.

While working with Mrs. Cullinan, Maya is termed out with different names:

...she called me by the wrong name. Miss Glory and I were washing up the lunch dishes when Mrs. Cullinan came to the doorway. "Mary?" Miss Glory asked, "Who?" Mrs. Cullinan, sagging a little, knew and I knew. "I

want Mary to go down to Mrs. Randall's and take her some soup. She's not been feeling well for a few days." Miss Glory's face was a wonder to see. "You mean Margaret, ma'am. Her name's Margaret." "That's too long. She's Mary from now on. (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 105)

Maya's resistance to discrimination and prejudice takes many vicissitudes in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The tussle between insecurity and displacement keeps toggling throughout her childhood but still she resorts to one of the life's most important principle to stand up for what you have faith in and do not allow anyone to take advantage of you. One of the dominant alterations from the total parting of sense of worth and race to the amalgamation of the two comes in the fragment where Mrs. Flowers makes Maya feel liked and respected. "It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself." (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 92)

She comprehends this truth with grace and accepts racism as pure and simple:

" 'Lift ev'ry voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty ...'
...It was the Negro national anthem" (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 178).

The interrogation of self, transits from self-hatred into self-pride and by accepting it with pride mantra that I am Black: "All my work, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith. While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated." (McPherson, Dolly A. (1990). *Order Out of Chaos*: New York: Peter Lang Publishing 10–11.)

References

Primary Source:

[1] Angelou, M. (1969). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House.

Secondary Source

[2] Tate, C (1999). "Maya Angelou: An Interview." In Braxton, J. M. (ed.), *Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird sings": A Casebook* (p. 153). New York: Oxford University Press.

[3] McPherson, Dolly A. (1990). *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing (p. 10–11).

[4] Tagore, Rabindranath. Gitanjali 35 "Where the Mind is Without Fear." (Lines 3-4): Published by Indian Society of London, November 1912.