

THE IMPACT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM ON THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMAN: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MAYA ANGELOU'S “I KNOW THE CAGED BIRD SINGS”

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Abstract: “*A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.*” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*)

Transcendentalism is an idealistic literary and philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century, centered around Ralph Waldo Emerson. Which celebrates individualism or nature and urges resistance to the dictates of organized society. It also introduced the core ideas of self- justification, value and awareness.

Maya Angelou was an author, poet, historian and civil right activist. Amongst the women writers around the world, Maya Angelou, presents a strong urge to break the binary opposition in male- archetype society. By using autobiographical tool she presents detail of the cruel interaction that occurs between slaves' holders, as well as how slaves are supposed to behave in the presence of their masters.

Maya Angelou not only focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood but also illustrates how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma. Thus in the course of *Caged Bird*, Maya transformed herself from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self- possessed , dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice. Henceforth Angelou uses her autobiography to explore subjects such as a celebration of black motherhood, a critique of racism, the importance of family and the quest for independence, personal dignity and self-definition and also manifest new ways about women's lives in a male- dominated society.

Thus this paper will attempt to explore and inspect the belongingness of women to their land, the fear of dislocation and socio-cultural change, the problem of adopting the new cultural identity and psychological and psycho-social problems which occurred in the lives of the women.

Henceforth this paper is an effort to find out the ways in which Maya Angelou's work “*I Know the Caged Bird Sings*” challenges the patriarchal structure of the society and provides an overview of the multiple layers of the African- American women's experience. Thus Maya Angelou defines a new life for African American Women and hold them in high esteem.

Keywords: (Be) longingness, History, Identity Crisis, Subaltern, Transcendentalism.

Introduction:

“A bird that stalks
Down his narrow cage
Can seldom see through
His bars of rage
His wings are clipped and
His feet are tied
So he opens his throat to sing”

(Maya Angelou, *Caged Bird*, Stanza.1)

As Arnold says in his essay, '*The Study of Poetry*' that poetry is the criticism of life under the fixed condition of “*The law of poetic truth and poetic beauty*” (pg.2), by this, he meant novel and profound

application of ideas to life. It present life in such a way that it may illumine us and inspire us. Poetry is an interpretational life as the poet experiences it and knows it bringing into play his intellect and mind matured by experiences and reading. Thus poetry is one of the most prestigious form of writing which shows deep feeling with beauty and elegance. It is an art that lies in the soul and spirit of man.

Maya Angelou, an American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. She played a vital role in bringing black literature into the mainstream. Her works mainly illustrates of black life. Her most well-known poem *Caged Bird*, was inspired by the true story of an enslaved African-American woman. The poem *Caged Bird* itself concern with life and its problem. Thus the idea, the subject matter, the theme of poetry should be relevant to the lives of people. At the same time it also contains high seriousness when it relates to painful past events. It keeps written documentary on slavery or human physical and psychological exploitation. Slavery began to exist before written history, in many cultures. A person could become a slave from the time of their birth, capture, or purchase and under the name of slavery an individual is forced to work against their own will, under threat of violence or other punishment, but the generic term unfree labor is also used to describe chattel slavery, as well as any other situation in which a person is obliged to work against their own will and a person's ability to work productively is under the complete control of another person.

Caged Song concentrates on black women and explores the relationship between women and literature. In poem, she associates *caged bird* to a woman who experiences lack of space and independence in the confined world which is considered as “*cult of womanhood*”. Where black woman has no history or space in the society. Thus Maya through caged bird depict the subjugation role of woman and put her into a primary role or equal base through the notion of self- recognition and kill the concept of “*Angel in the house*” that lead her through the path of ultimate liberation from caged world. Angelou creates fragmented psychological and physical image of black woman into a sequential, meaningful narrative form. Thus music metaphorically represent black writers who used art as a weapon to depict the realities of the life of the Negro people with its pain, joy, humour, faith and sorrows. Thus the poem fulfil its aim of search for black identity and explore the ideology of new aspect woman.

Autobiography, not only delves a detailed description of a person's life but it embodies spiritual experience of human life, his social and educational life. It explore emancipation of woman and invent woman's world by studying her history and concentrating on the image of woman.in an essay entitled “Aristotle's sister,” Lawrence Lipking wonders how we have managed to uncover so many of Shakespeare's sister writers, yet so few of Aristotle 's sister literary theorist. Thus Maya Angelou through the poem *Caged Bird*, metaphorically trace the history of woman poetics and uncover some consistent patterns among the black women writer and their *silence* about their experience towards life or their progressive spiritual and physical journey. Such as Maya Angelou, through autobiography reveal the transcendence state of mind when it achieve the knowledge of self-acknowledgement or self-worth. She does not present woman in dark light but depict her as strong woman who overcome from all hardships of life and her courage and determination transformed her into a powerful woman.

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hear a different drummer, let me step to the music which he hears however measured or faraway”

(Thoreau, *Walden*, p.120)

Transcendentalism, 19th-century movement of writers and philosophers in New England who were loosely bound together by adherence to an idealistic system of thought based on a belief in the essential unity of all creation, the innate goodness of humanity, and the supremacy of insight over logic and experience for the revelation of the deepest truths. Transcendentalists believed that humans were fundamentally good but corrupted by society and that they should therefore strive for independence and self-reliance. **Ralph Waldo Emerson** and **Henry David Thoreau** were two of the most famous transcendentalists and are highly extolled for their contribution to this movement nineteenth century. As Emerson believes that “The Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us (Emerson, Adventures 214).” Emerson informs that human intellect and nature are bound

together as one equal component of creation. We are constructed by God, as are animals, plants, and insects. Self-reliance, friendship, and experiences with nature are all transcendental features with which Emerson discusses in his essays.

Emerson discusses in his essays A powerful point directed to all humans is, "We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents (Emerson, Adventures 215)." This quote explains that we need to express ourselves as individualists, without relying on each other for material goods, or social purposes and emphasized the viewpoint of seeking inner values of believing that the over soul is our creator, who we originate from.

African American writers equated literacy with freedom. With their growing literacy, African American authors appealed to the traditional Christian doctrine of a universal brotherhood of humanity as a way of challenging the morality of slavery. African American literature tends to focus on themes of particular interest to Black people, for example, the role of African Americans within the larger American society and issues such as African American culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom, and equality. Angelou applied his education and bi-cultural perspective to illuminating the gaps of cultural and political understanding between the binary worlds. Writers spoke and wrote on behalf of a variety of reform causes: women's rights, temperance, peace, land reform, free public education, and the abolition of capital punishment. The narrative included many aspects of the slave's painful life journey. They often spoke of the way they were captured in their homeland.

"*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* liberates the reader into life simply because Maya Angelou confronts her own life with such a moving wonder, such a luminous dignity."

James Baldwin

Maya Angelou, American poet, memoirist and civil rights activist. She had become recognized not only as a spokesperson for blacks and women, but also for all people who are committed to raising the moral standard of living. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* captures the longing of lonely children, the brute insult of bigotry, and the wonder of words that can make the world right. Maya Angelou's debut memoir is a modern American classic beloved worldwide. Through the poem, poet belief that human beings have self-wisdom and may gain this knowledge or wisdom by tuning in to the ebb and flow of nature thus her work revolves around the self, specifically the betterment of the self.

In the poem, Angelou employs poetic devices to contrast a free bird with a bird who is confined to a cage; the two different birds serve as metaphors for people free from oppression and people who are oppressed by society, respectively. The caged bird symbolizes the people from the black race that were discriminated by the white society. The bird singing voice is its intellectual mind who is wishing to break down established boundaries and stereotypes of blacks that had been cultivated through several centuries of colonial rule. Thus bird's melody lead it towards the aim of freedom from all prejudiced mind. Thus it represent *Negritude Movement*, whose sole focus is to espouse a reaffirmation of traditional African culture and identity and through progressive literature, art and culture it express black psychological perspective by connecting it with the study of physical relation to superior world where human respect is considered through race, class and gender and creates the idea of *xenophobia* (deep-rooted fear towards foreigners). Thus Writer's voice communicate their ideas through producing various forms of literary art and creative writing and sometime present self-reflective mode of journal or individual viewpoint by addressing both internal and external experiences. Thus she transformed voice into electric and transformative which offers a brilliant illumination and critique of colonial society, the struggle against colonialism and the struggle against colonialism and the pathologies of post colony. In "Caged Bird," Maya Angelou juxtaposes the ideas of a free bird and a caged bird displays the effects of oppression by singing a painful melody and make an attempt to harmonize mental fragmentation with music or reveal the epidemic of hopeless where human identity is considered through preconceived eye or mind.

The poem is a contrast between a caged bird and a free bird which metaphorically also represent two world where self and other or orient or occident ideology possess value. Where human possess value through stereotyped portrayal of black in the mind of white society. The caged bag is said to represent the African American individual who is enslaved while the free bird represents the White American who is completely free. The poem depicts the actual racial discrimination that existed between the White and Black races in the US, South Africa and elsewhere. It portrays the ugly effects of racism and gives hopes to the black race that have suffered but music becomes the symbol of hope for freedom where they have option or choices for life and music represent their revolt against the controlled life or caged world.

In reading about Angelou's own life, the poem also clearly reflects her own feelings of being trapped in a binary opposition society or a key concept of structuralism that creates boundaries between groups of people one of the two opposites assumes a role of dominance over the other and leads to prejudice and discrimination and becomes "other" who look at one self through the eye of other. The poem she sheds more light on the white male's definition and the degradations of black woman and represent the idea of thrice jeopardy of black woman who is oppressed and suppressed by both the experience of colonization and the male-dominated society because in the colonial space, black woman experiences a much harsher and severe sort of oppression because of the colonialist's excessive attention to the body of black woman as sexual object to be watched and enjoyed; that is just one dimension of black woman's unfortunate fate. The poem also documents Angelou's life as a slave and how she gained freedom for herself and for her children. She explores the struggles and sexual abuse that female slaves faced on plantations as well as their efforts to practice motherhood and protect their children when their children might be sold away. Thus Angelou makes a direct appeals towards social's humanity to expand their knowledge and influence their thoughts about slavery as an institution and depict successfully the struggle through the life of struggle. In addition she presents an authentic account of one black woman's girlhood and adolescence navigating the complex terrain of male-chauvinist slave-based, white-supremacist civilization. Thus she showed that the institution of slavery made it impossible for African-American women to control their virtue, as they were subject to the social and economic power of men. Further she suggests that society's definition of womanhood was too narrow that made black woman with different experience as slave or mother made her life more miserable and critical. So is in the poem, bird through music explores its plight for limitation set by the society and it cries out for freedom portray its ray of hope for acquiring *liberty, equality and fraternity*. Therefore caged bird chants with an aim "*be heard on the distant hill*". As U.S. President Barack Obama, during his farewell speech at McCormick Place, Chicago he said "*One voice can change a room, and if one voice can change a room, then it can change a city, and if it can change a city, it can change a state, and if it change a state, it can change a nation, and if it can change a nation, it can change the world. Your voice can change the world.*"- thus literature has courage to unveil the hidden truths of human condition, to reveal where he is going wrong and how he can put him selves right. Thus caged bird represent *Harlem Renaissance* and *Negro Movement*, which sole purpose is to emerge each person voice that have been relegated by superior class, simultaneously prevent woman from being degraded to a secondary role. Thus it became a tool to convergence of people who wanted to be able to educate and express themselves.

Angelou uses her autobiography to explore subjects such as identity, rape, racism, and literacy. She also writes in new ways about women's lives in a male-dominated society. As Maya Angelou once said "*If you don't like something, change it, change your attitude.*" In a way she sums up the poem, *Caged Bird*, which also reveal her autobiography and illustrates that how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma. Angelou was born in 1928 and lived with either her mother or grandmother for most of her early years. At aged eight, she was raped by her uncle, she became mute for six years after this. Angelou, after leaving home, worked in various jobs, including as a streetcar conductor, fry cook, sex worker, nightclub dancer and performer. As a single, black mother in 1950 and 1960s she worked hard, gaining acclaim with the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She has since published many other works, and in 1993 read a poem at President Clinton's inauguration. Thus Literacy and the power of words help young Maya cope with her bewildering world; her poem become her refuge as she works through her trauma. Hence, with the publication of *I Know Why the*

Caged Bird Sings, Angelou publicly discussed aspects of her personal life. Angelou studied and began writing poetry at a young age, and used poetry and other great literature to cope with her rape as a young girl, as described in *Caged Bird*. As a consequence of her such hard toil, her poems have been called the anthems of African Americans. She was respected as a spokesperson for black people and women, and her works have been considered a defense of black culture and the quest for independence, personal dignity, and self-definition.

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