
MAYA ANGELOU: A CAGED BIRD SINGING

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Abstract: Maya Angelou, a remarkable Renaissance woman, autobiographer, poet, actress, and political activist, is hailed as one of the great voices of contemporary literature. With the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1968, Maya Angelou embarked on an epic journey as a memoirist that led to seven autobiographical works- an incomparable autobiographical achievement that established her image as an autobiographer per excellence. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* undoubtedly explore growing up Black and female in the American South during the second quarter of twentieth century. The world to which Angelou introduces us is embroidered with humiliation, violation, displacement, and loss. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is proof of the redoubtable characters of women who shake off, in their own individualistic ways, the stigma of discrimination, the burden of persecution and the exploitation of their bodies to emerge as valiant champion of womanhood.

Introduction: Maya Angelou, a remarkable Renaissance woman, autobiographer, poet, actress, and political activist, is hailed as one of the great voices of contemporary literature. Born as Marguerite Annie Johnson on 4th April, 1928 in St. Louis to Vivian Baxter and Bailey Johnson, a civilian dietitian for the U.S. Navy, Maya Angelou has thrilled the world with her autobiographies. With the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1968, Maya Angelou embarked on an epic journey as a memoirist that led to seven autobiographical works- an incomparable autobiographical achievement that established her image as an autobiographer per excellence. In fact, she recreated the very genre of autobiography in an innovative way. Because she choose to unburden her feelings and inner most thoughts about all the woes like poverty, discrimination, racist abuses, gender bias and even rape which she suffered in her life, she epitomizes all Black American Women's suffering caused by the tentacles of slavery and its aftermath. In fact, she was, until her death in 2014 the unquestionable spokesperson of all Black women who experienced the wickedness and cruelty of the degradation of Negroes by white Americans. As a matter of fact, she is recognized as a having a typical autobiographical style that presents her as the 'central' character of her literary works- something that other Black women autobiographers had never achieved before in the truest sense of the term. Such was the range of her creativity that hardly anyone disputes the fact that she was Americas most celebrated autobiographer in the last two decades of her life.

Maya Angelou ingenious ways of approaching her autobiography is evident from the beginning itself. Her pathetic experience in the children section of Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in Stamps, a town in Arkansas where she spent her formative year, exposes the reader to her helplessness- the helplessness she experienced as a miserable Negro girl afflicted with nervous forgetfulness. She

unhesitatingly introduced herself, with scatters an imaginative description about herself as an ungainly child who had been cruelly transformed by a fiery step mother into too big Negro girl with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth and skinny legs and skin which looked dirty like mud. The young awkward Maya, dressed in a cut down, faded purple, too long taffeta gown, stand nervously before an Easter Congregation in Stamps, Arkansas, reciting a poem, asking "What you looking at me for?" "Is something wrong with me?"(5) For this child too much is wrong. The whole way she looks is wrong, and she knows it. That is why they are looking at her. Wrong dress; wrong legs; wrong hair; wrong face; wrong color. It is with this nightmarish experience in her "lost childhood" in Stamps that Maya begins her search for identity in her maiden autobiography. The opening lines echo her feelings when people looked at her scrawny figure. They presage her vagrant and itinerant childhood. They also anticipate the lustful looks of her mother's lover who would rape her and tear her childhood apart. In boarder perspective, they underline Maya's footloose life and her future adventures despite the negative looks some people cast on her. But since this life is only a dream, the child knows she will awaken soon into a rightened, a whitened reality. The first important comment about wretchedness of being a Negro girl indicates how, even as a girl, not yet fit for school, Maya Angelou had already started to suffer the psychological burden of racism that her flesh was heir to in America: "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."(6) Although the wretched girl was filled with joy at escaping an explosion of her poor head, the enduring image of Maya as a little girl is that of a waif, peeing and crying and preparing for a whipping at home after escaping from the church. As an autobiographer, Maya Angelou steered clear of a strictly chronological order of the events, emotions

and thoughts and fantasies that influenced her throughout her childhood and later worked on her adolescent mind as well.

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* undoubtedly explore growing up Black and female in the American South during the second quarter of twentieth century. The world to which Angelou introduces us is embroidered with humiliation, violation, displacement, and loss. Angelou sounds the pervading themes when she declares: "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 necessary insult." From this introduction she wends her way to the end of her work, where she concludes: "the Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and the Black lack of power."

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings begins with the humiliations of childhood and ends with the birth of a child. At its publication, critics, not anticipating a series, readily appreciated the clearly developed narrative form. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* becomes imperative to reiterate that Maya Angelou's personal song echoes the aspirations of millions of Black women and shows up the pathetic depravity of the white folks who persisted their voice of prejudice and continual to perpetuate discrimination against colored folks in the USA long after slavery has been abolished. This Black masterpiece is an authentic commentary of the ills of racial prejudice that puncture the lives of Black folks and deflates their lives. It also reveals how Black man, when they think they have become somebody, takes advantage of their masculinity to treat women with disrespect. Above

all, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is proof of the redoubtable characters of women who shake off, in their own individualistic ways, the stigma of discrimination, the burden of persecution and the exploitation of their bodies to emerge as valiant champion of womanhood.

With the unqualified success of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the critical acclaimed for its refreshingly unconventional autobiographical style and technique that bordered on fiction, Maya Angelou was inspired to plough further into her life experiences. So in due course of time, autobiography after autobiography flowed out of her recollections in quick succession. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was first published in 1968 and at the time of her death in 2014, she was into her eighth autobiography which could well have proved to be her master piece – a vision insight into global leaders and international geo-politics.

Each of her other published autobiographies is replete with delectable imaginative touches and each reveals some aspects of Maya Angelou's prismatic life and achievement. Together they contain sundry fascinating details of her iconic personality and vignettes of her black relatives and friends in manners comparable to an art gallery of a painter's work. However, the vistas of her autobiographical works served to underline the inimitable courage and boundless energy of a Black woman who almost single handedly set about the task of redefining the true blood of the Negro race in America. These autobiographies, champion the cause of Black folks and justifies their aspiration to the world, while, at the same time upholding their true image in the USA post- slavery.

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