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Motherhood : I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

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Abstract:

Autobiography is a genre, used by Black people to record their life. If the same genre was used by Black Women, it was not taken into account, because it was the work of a Woman and especially of a Poor Black Woman. They had also recorded their life through autobiographies. These Autobiographies were expanded in the early 1960's as a subgenre of Black Autobiography. The Civil Rights Movement and Woman's Movement emerged in 1960's and accelerated the black woman's activism. They got the opportunity to dispose of their prejudiced image through autobiographical narratives. Maya Angelou is a Black American woman writer who has contributed works in the field of her personal narratives. She has mirrored the lives of black women taking into consideration her own life. She uses her narratives to define her identity, to describe her life-journey against many heavy odds. It was the time when the sense of blackness in the white world brought shame, self-hatred and self-depreciation. She struggled a lot against the heavy odds. she was a strong, determined woman who could face any adverse circumstances for her survival, and the credit she gives to the mother-figures she met. She feels indebted to them in her life. Her grandmother, her biological mother and her surrogate mother played a major part in the upbringing of Maya. This study attempts to examine the role of these mothers in the formation of Maya. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is her first autobiography, in which she has recorded it. Maya, who was abandoned by her mother, has learnt to be a good mother by the end of this work.

This study attempts to do the detail study of mother-figures. The black women had already received the legacy from earlier black writers. Maya becomes successful in using the motherhood theme through her autobiographical narratives. She defines her identity as an African-American woman. Angelou presents the dominant Godmother figures around and then she shares her personal experiences of motherhood after the birth of her son. Angelou has provided a role model for other black women who struggle to support their children.

Keywords: Motherhood, African-American, Identity, Black Woman, Autobiography, Maya Angelou.

The Africans have a long history of slavery. They had no human identity of their own in America. The American continent was the host country for the business of slaves. Even the

slaves were given different names to cut all the links they had to their ancestry and roots. It is at the end of the nineteenth century also, they were known as African-Americans only. Then after many years, the thinkers among them like Alain LeRoy Locke, Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois took the initiative of forming a movement, a rebellion, called as Harlem Renaissance. It was a cultural, social, and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem, New York, around 1920s. Sir Alain Locke called it the "New Negro Movement." The African-American authors and poets, artists, musicians, and movie stars found greater freedom of expression and greater support from white sponsors during the Harlem Renaissance. It was the critical period for African-Americans, because Harlem movement created awareness among them of the loss of identity, encouraged them to discover the talents among them to be the responsible citizens. The scholars who came forward in this period were Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Angelina W. Grimke, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Ida B. Wells – Barnett, Lois Mailou Jones, William H. Johnson and Palmer Hayden. Again after many years Alice Walker, Lorraine Hansberry and Maya Angelou, these black women started the mission. They desired change. They wanted to fight with the circumstances. No doubt they wanted to create their own identity in the Black community.

This article is an attempt to learn in detail about the life-journey of Maya Angelou. She has recorded this representative struggle through her narratives. Her autobiographies are the personal narratives, self-revelations. She knew that she had to suffer because she was black, female and not beautiful, but Maya was a very strong woman, she didn't like to be defeated. She wanted to survive and so she determined not to be subdued on human basis. She struggled and she survived. When she received the opportunity of writing an autobiography, she used it as a means of voicing the sufferings, oppression. Maya gives the credit of her successful life to the mother-figures she met. Maya had already the knowledge of the literary foremothers teaching their daughters of the future generation strategies of survival in a racist and gender biased world.

Maya Angelou stands out as an individual in the chorus of these Black women singing for their daughters. It means a woman looks back to the past and learns lessons of wisdom through her mother and foremothers. In such a female bonding lies her strength. The impressions of the foremothers compelled her to discover herself, to evaluate herself. So we find Maya discovering herself through her writings.

Maya Angelou is one of the well known black female writers of the twentieth century. Inspired by the writer James Baldwin. She put her anecdotes together and created her first book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* which became a classic of black women autobiographies. Although she was best known for her first autobiography, she wrote a series of autobiographies. Her most famous works can be listed as *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin'* and *Getting' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Needs* *Traveling Shoes* (1996). Some of her most famous poems are put in a collection called *The Collected Works of Maya Angelou* (1994), and *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die* (1971). Her later poem book was also nominated for Pulitzer Prize. And *I Still Rise* (1978) is another

striking work of her. Moreover she wrote children's books and *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (1993) became the most recognized one. Most of her works focus on the struggles of a black girl raised in a white dominated society. Maya's strenuous efforts of achieving success, to be an independent woman and mother, and finally, and most importantly, as a respectable African American are very noteworthy.

We can say that the marginal sections have resorted to this genre to maintain a record of their exploitation, oppression at the hands of the stronger sections of society. In this sense the genre expresses their collective condition and voices their collective hopes for redressal. Estelle Jelinek in *Women's Autobiographies: Essays in Criticism*, compares women's autobiographies with men and agrees that if it is an autobiography of a woman, she will not talk about her public and professional aspects of her life but the focus will be on personal, domestic details, close friends, and those who influenced her.

It seems very important here to explain the concept of autobiography. Different definitions have been offered to explain the concept of autobiography as a literary genre, but there is no fixed structure for it. The word auto/bio/graphy means self/ life/ story, the narrative of the events in a person's life. It is also known as life writing or the literature of self-revelation. Angelou's autobiography is an unfinished narrative, she insists on calling her works autobiographies, not novels. For her, autobiography is a special form, consciously chosen as her most effective genre. In an interview, she told Jackie Kay that "I think I am the only serious writer who has chosen the autobiographical form as the main form to carry my work, my expression" (1989, 195).

Then, if autobiography is the writing of one's own life story, it depends solely on the writer's memory. Maya Angelou has written successfully a series of autobiographies. It is a journey of Maya's life. She has written the story herself, in the first person. She has not recorded all these things for entertainment but her intention is to make the readers learn from her life. As the focus of our study is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, it is an account of her life journey from childhood to adulthood. Maya, who lives dependent life, becomes a responsible mother at the end. This is like the British novelist James Joyce who said, "Once upon a time and a very good time it was" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Maya's life has taught her the art of living like James Joyce.

As an African Autobiographer, Angelou shares the pain of the past while celebrating the hard-won accomplishments of the present. Like the women autobiographers who preceded her, Angelou is writing her life through her readings of those other life stories that came before her. In an interview in 1983, Angelou was asked by Claudia Tate, whether her writings were "autobiographical novels or autobiographies" Angelou's emphatic reply was "autobiographies". Implicit in Angelou's response is her recognition of a clear difference between the novel and autobiography: the novel form is a fiction in which the author employs narrative techniques in

the construction of the story; the autobiographical form is where the author, as subject combines the elements of fact and fiction as recreations of the author's life experiences. As personal memory is as unstable recording of the fact, it is unwise to assume that autobiographical writing is not the complete truth, nor should the reader of the autobiography expect it to be.

These autobiographies often pay tribute to the black mothers who were responsible for engendering a sense of pride in their blackness. The autobiographical mode has been used by these writers to unveil the complexities in the adult life of a black woman.

A few landmark writers from the time of Nancy Prince and Harriet Jacobs to Nikki Giovanni are the foremothers of black autobiographies. They appealed to their black daughters to join in their struggle by fighting for their rights; and appealed to the dominant group to create a moral consciousness to support their cause. Thus the collective identity is largely responsible for nurturing and strengthening the individual identity of the marginalized daughters. Their primary intention was to leave a message for their black daughters and thereby develop a "collective consciousness".

Alice Walker's path breaking essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", and her short story "Everyday Use" emphasized this idea of the spark of creativity being handed down through generations as a maternal heritage. Admitting her indebtedness to her mother and foremothers, Alice Walker believes that they had sown the seeds which bore fruit in the literary garden that she has created. In searching for the reasons behind her own artistic and political emancipation, Walker probes into the legacy of the past and wonders how they had managed to keep their creativity alive when all attempts had been made to nip it in the bud. These women died with their creative spirit stifled in them because it was not allowed written expression. But fortunately, for the creative daughters, this legacy survived in the oral form, through the stories they told and the songs that they sang. Walker says that she just put her signature on the legacy handed down to her in the form of oral narratives by transcribing it into the written form.

In an interview with Rosa Guy in 1988 Angelou talks about her indebtedness to her literary foremothers: I want to go back to the world of Black women, the world of Black women writers. I think first I'd like to talk about the propensity to build friendship and the need for friendship among Black women.....because I'm serious about encouraging young Black women not to lose this thing we have had historically, and might be the singular most important aspect of our survival (Guy, 1989:234).

"Image making is very important for every human being. It is especially important for black American women in that we are, by being black, a minority in the United States, and by being female, the less powerful of the genders. So, we have two areas we must address. If we look out of our eyes at the immediate world around us, we see whites and males in dominant roles. We

need to see our mothers, aunts, our sisters, and grandmothers..... We need to have these women preserved”.

-Maya Angelou, An Interview with Claudia Tate

In Celebration of Motherhood Angelou (2004) explains in “Phenomenal Mothers I Have Known,” an article she wrote and published in the Magazine Ebony that she is what she is today because of the wonderful roles played by some women who were very instrumental and phenomenal in bringing her up. Making reference to some names she mentions in her texts in autobiography including Momma Henderson, Mrs. Bertha Flowers and her own biological mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson, she showers praises on them for the wonderful upbringing they give her, especially about the African –American way of life. She confesses that all the inspirations she gets to move her on are from these wonderful women. However, Angelou singles out her paternal grandmother, Momma Henderson and comments that her unique sense of parentage and motherhood out of which emanates her strong sense of will-power as a woman is worthy of emulation for every African-American woman. Angelou adds that she herself is one such phenomenal woman.

Her autobiography is not merely the story of her individual self, but the story of her foremothers who collectively and through generations passed on to Maya the essence of her being - a Black American woman who is also an individual in her own right. Like many young African-American girls, she has multiple models of “mother” who may be termed as “surrogate mothers” or “other mothers”.

“Under the guidance of.... our foremothers, let us rebuild a sense of community. Let us rebuild the culture of giving and carry on the tradition of fierce determination to move on closer to freedom”.

- Assata Shakur

“Women In Prison : The Way We Are”

In an interview given in October 1977 Maya Angelou clearly states that the one person who influenced her most during childhood was her paternal grandmother. She says “I owe much more to my grandmother and my brother [than to my mother], whom I credit with saving my life - both my mental and spiritual life, as well as my breathing-in and breathing-out life”.

Maya’s paternal grandmother Annie Henderson embodies the eternal quality of the ancestral figure in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. She represents the Black matriarch who was also the pillar of the African families. Momma Henderson is a woman of independent means who runs ‘Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store in Stamps, Arkansas, and is the breadwinner for the family comprising of two little grandchildren and a crippled son. At the age of three when Maya is sent to Stamps along with her brother Bailey, it is Grandmother Henderson who provides them stability and security. The children become an integral part of her general store,

her religion and her life. The first part of *Caged Bird* is an invocation to the spirit of her grandmother.

Angelou says: “Momma intended to teach.... the paths of life that she and all Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones,” (*Caged Bird*:39). Grandmother Henderson nurtured Marguerite and her brother Bailey Jr, and did her best to protect her grandchildren. Annie Henderson, a solid God fearing woman, is the moral center of the family. A source of folk wisdom and the instiller of values, she is the social hub at Stamps. She is pretty economical and Maya has imbibed this trait. She wields the economic power to lend money to the whites. She even owes land on which the whites stay. Angelou says: My grandmother had more money than all the powhitetrash. We owned land and house, but each day Bailey and I were cautioned, ‘waste not, want not’ (*Caged Bird*:48). In spite of being well-off as compared to the other villagers. This helps Maya to live through the numerous financial crunches that she faces in her later life.

These are the formative influences in her life. Living in Stamps, Maya learns to identify herself as a black with all the humiliations and disadvantages. Maya comes to feel a sense of solidarity with the people of her race. This group identity binds her not only to the Black community but also develops a distinctive and strong bond with the nurturing female community. This is identical to the theory of the Black Female Bonding. This connectedness is further intensified by the identification with and the influence of her biological mother Vivian Baxter when she goes to live with her in St. Louis and California. However, Vivian certainly does not engender a bond for the community in Maya. She influences Maya in a way that helps her to develop a strong individual female self. Coupled together, the influence of the grandmother, communal bonding and the influence of the mother, development as an individual self, shape Maya’s persona. Mrs. Annie Henderson shows that, by centering one’s being in God, one can endure and mitigate the effects of an unjust world. Angelou internalizes these silent lessons. It is grandmother Henderson’s religion that gives her the power to order her being and that of the children. Grandmother teaches Maya that strength is not to be derived only from physical appearance. She says, “People spoke of Momma as a good-looking woman,

I saw only her power and strength.”

She was taller than any woman in my personal world, and her hands were so large they could span my head from ear to ear. Her voice was soft only because she chose to keep it so (*Caged Bird*).

Maya has, in fact, inherited her Momma’s physical traits because she toostands six-feet tall and has a large body.

Grandmother Henderson, who passes on to Maya her legacy of high moral values, faith in God and religion, the power to endure and most importantly gives her lessons on self-sufficiency and financial independence is Maya's first role-model. She is a model of courage, perseverance and endurance and her teachings prove to be an anchor for Maya. Momma's religion has also taught Maya that "life" is a precious gift of God and "death" is the greatest leveler. In an interview with Devinia Sookia Angelou reveals how her Grandmother had once told her:

'Sister, all over the world, white and black and others went to sleep last night.... Their beds had become their cooking boards and their blankets had become their winding sheets.'

This is a very precious lesson about the art of living that Maya learned from Momma. This has been instrumental in making her approach to life very human as she grew up. Besides, knowing the importance of life she celebrates every living moment of her life as a mature individual. But while she was a child in Stamps this kind of maturity had not developed.

In an interview with Lucinda Moore that took place in April 2003, Angelou talks about her grandmother's legacy to her. She says: She taught me not to lie to myself or anyone else and not to boast.... Because of her, I think, I have remained a very simple woman.... I have no subterfuge. She taught me not to complain.

She lets go about the insecurities about her looks to come forward as an intellectual. Another mother who helps Maya to define herself as an intellectual is Mrs. Flowers. She is a polished, refined and highly educated Black American widow. Because of the way she is, she was highly respected in the Stamps community. Mrs. Flowers comes into Angelou's life during young Angelou's period of silence at Stamps, Arkansas. Maya says, She is the woman who made me proud of a negro first. Mrs. Bertha Flowers can be termed as the mother of Maya Angelou, the creative writer, because she initiated little eleven year old Maya into the world of English literature.

We see that she is made to understand the positive power of words "language is man's way of communicating with his fellow men and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals", explains Mrs. Flowers. She also is instrumental in inculcating in Maya an understanding of the importance of the human voice in generating shades of meaning. She explains to Maya that "words" mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meanings (Caged Bird :95). The blossoming poet in Angelou was introduced to the nuances of rhyme and rhythm for the first time: " I heard poetry for the first time in my life" (Caged Bird :97). In a sense, Mrs. Flowers trained Angelou's ear to appreciate the musicality of the English language. Mrs. Flowers is also instrumental in engendering in Maya a sense of self and self-confidence, both of which were conspicuously absent in her. The opening paragraph of The Caged Bird where Maya flees from the church service peeing and screaming: "what you looking at me for?"(Caged Bird:3), shows the rock

bottom level at which her self-confidence lay. The reasons for this could be many. Firstly, the girl knows that she is unwanted by her mother and so is living with her paternal grandmother. On the other hand, racism has done enough damage to the Black American psyche to make the Black American girls believe in the traditional standards of feminine beauty laid down by the whites. As a result when every black girl thought that to be beautiful was to have white skin, blue eyes and golden hair, it was but natural that Maya too would conform to this false notion. Added to this was the fact that Maya was unusually tall and ugly, even according to black standards. Maya has written in a letter to Rosa Guy dated February 4, 1996, that her belief as a child that she was ugly was absolute and no one, not even Momma, tried to dissuade her from believing that she was an ugly child. Under the circumstances it was natural that Maya should be low on self-esteem. She thinks that all the things that Momma does for her are out of a sense of duty, because she is her granddaughter and not out of pure love. On the other hand when Mrs. Flowers makes tea-cookies for her and reads to her from her favorite book, Maya feels loved for what she is. She says: "I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grand child... but for just being Marguerite [Maya] Johnson." (Caged Bird:98). Such respect and attention that she receives at the hands of a role model act as a balm to the raw wounds of Maya who is suffering from a lacerated self-esteem and self-loathing. Angelou pays a great tribute to Mrs. Flowers when she says that she "threw me my first life line"(Caged Bird:90).

The negative impact of segregation is a blow to Maya's personal as well as racial sense of pride and could have impaired Maya's sense of self permanently, but foremothers like Mrs. Flowers have been the saving grace in her life. Maya's statement about Mrs. Flowers makes us aware of the sense of pride she infused in Maya's life: "She made me proud to be a Negro just by being herself" (Caged Bird:92). It is on such statements of racial pride that the Black movement against racism has been rooted. It is the voice of the ancestral mothers, the pride that they had in their Blackness which was handed down over generations as a legacy. This is the first time in her life that Maya is proud of her Blackness, the high point of which is evident in the Joe Louis victory, which "proved that we were the strongest people in the world" (Caged Bird:132), and the culmination is Maya's conclusion at the end of the graduation scene: "I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race"(Caged Bird:179). The echo of this statement runs throughout the serial autobiography like the refrain of the Black song of freedom.

Mrs. Flowers gives her lessons in living and represents for her "the measure of what a human being can be". She introduces Maya to the world of literature and is the first one to inspire a sense of "self-worth" in Maya. She encourages Maya to "break her silence" both literally and metaphorically. Maya gives voice to her creative urge by beginning to write poetry at the age of nine. Maya even starts maintaining a diary. Miss. Kirwin influences Maya by her practical approach and her wealth of learning. Her sense of discipline, detachment and total lack of discrimination are the characteristics that Maya appreciates.

The women who inhabit Maya's world are all strong, active and independent so Maya can easily identify with them and be influenced by them. The real introduction to Mrs. Baxter's personality and strength comes through when Mr. Freeman, who had been sentenced to one year-one-day imprisonment for Maya's rape, is murdered after the trial. When Mrs. Baxter is informed about Mr. Freeman's death, she is not at all surprised and it is not difficult to conclude that she had a hand in Mr. Freeman's being "kicked to death". "An eye for an eye" is the philosophy of her life. She is the illustration of the ancestral mother, the proctress, who will retaliate violently if her family is hurt. She is a powerful political figure in St. Louis and a gambler who commands respect because of her "white skin" and "six mean children" (Caged Bird: 60).

At the beginning of Caged Bird we find a longing for a mother who was unavailable when her daughter needed her most, and a lot of anger, pain and despair associated with it. But gradually, as the book proceeds, it seems that Vivian has been given rational forgiveness and there are no grudges. Vivian Baxter, her mother, passes on to Maya the legacy of values that she held dear - self-sufficiency, boldness, confidence, survival instinct, vivacity and her wit. She is the major "word bringer" in Angelou's life. She acquaints Maya with her philosophy of life and introduces her to survival strategies which ultimately shape Maya's personality. Vivian, who obviated life's obstacles and was ready to take up any challenge, trains Maya to do the same. She supports her children with humour and imagination and remains an invincible resource from which Maya's black feminine self is moulded. She teaches Maya to challenge the stereotypical expectations with which the white people or black men tried to constrict a black woman's being. She teaches Maya to excel in any profession that she takes up. Maya's multifaceted personality has been honed under Vivian's influence. Maya too has tried her hand at a variety of careers. Vivian has taught Maya not to be "the mule of the world", an important lesson in survival that many black women have taught their daughters. Maya has also inherited Vivian's unflinching honesty. Throughout the serial autobiography we find Maya consciously or unconsciously turning to her mother's and grand-mother's strength as a source of her own.

Her growing awareness of her femaleness in Caged Bird reaches its climax when at the end of the book, Maya attains motherhood. In fact Maya's womanism, her celebration of her womanhood is a legacy that was bestowed upon her by her mothers.

Maya Angelou is indeed a phenomenal woman whose life symbolizes strength of character and perseverance that should serve as an inspiration to all. Angelou goes in "search of her mother's garden, guided by the heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength" (Walker:1983) and, in the act of writing an autobiography, she creates her own garden. Her autobiographies cross all racial and geographical barriers and reach out with a message of the survival and victory of the woman's spirit in spite of odds. They are a wholehearted celebration of motherhood, womanhood and humanhood. Viewed from the perspective of the foremothers' legacy, Angelou,

in the six volumes of her autobiography, is transcribing her foremothers' narratives and putting her signature on it.

Leaving behind nights of terror,
centuries of fear, I rise

Into a daybreak miraculously clear, I rise.

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors [foremothers] gave,
I am the hope, and the dream - o f the
Slave [woman].

- Maya Angelou And Still I rise.

In this way the study concludes that although there are many psychological and emotional setbacks for Maya Angelou throughout her life in her quest for self- recognition, she does find her identity along the journey. In turn, Angelou, who becomes a mother at the end of *Caged Bird*, learns to fulfil the role of nurturer and protector as a new mother. The study of Angelou's life reveals that she debunked right from the time she became a mother the idea of working inside the home. However, the study has revealed that Angelou refutes this whole idea and proves that she identifies with the tradition of feminist independence and responsibility which takes its roots from working slave women who worked from dawn to dusk to feed whole households including their male counterparts and even white slave owners and their families. Her mother as a working mother, and her grandmother as a workingwoman, also practically bring to life Angelou's link to a family of working mothers. As a mother, Angelou is seen to be working tirelessly to make ends meet to prevent her from being dependent.

Angelou succeeds when she points to two very able women, and probably three, Vivian Baxter, Momma Henderson, and Mrs. Flowers, who raised her. These three women have served as mothers and role models for Angelou, and so they used their motherhood role to influence angelou in her search for an identity as an African –American woman within the African-American tradition.

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