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A Kaleidoscopic Study of Maya Angelou's Autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract:

American author Maya Angelou wrote her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a poignant, sensitive yet intensely revealing narrative of racial prejudice; existential and identity crisis, as well as most personal mental dilemmas faced by her black female protagonist. The novel traces her eventual protest in resistance to all social biases. This paper examines the multi-layered and continuously transforming shades of the life of Marguerite Anne Johnson, who later changed her name to Maya Angelou, from ages three to sixteen through a kaleidoscopic lens. The main protagonist progresses from an innocent and miserable child to a mature mother. The primary focus of this study follows the influence of various ideas and thoughts, as well as social, cultural, and ethnic groups in her journey. Some of the most striking aspects of the book manifest the author's intentions to uncover use of language, imagery, and symbols, characters, narrative techniques, and themes, which exhibit a kaleidoscope of variety, depth, and richness. The title, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, as an autobiographical novel is a cry—protest against human suffering caused by gender and racial biases. The author draws attention to the stark, bleak, and depressive situation of black people in America during her time and conveys feelings of loneliness and non-belongingness experienced as a part of a discarded society. She employs the symbol of the caged bird to illustrate as also explore the pathetic, depraved, and deprived condition of marginalized people in the segregated South through the story of an abandoned child who experiences rape trauma, racial prejudice, and gender biases in

a highly permissive society. The novel holistically is a powerful portrayal of African-American life.

Keywords: identity, racism, protest, trauma, Black female, marginalized, gender, rape, kaleidoscope.

Marguerite Anne Johnson, popularly known as Maya Angelou, is an indomitable force to reckon with and an indelible milestone in Black American literature. Her autobiographical works have been a source of inspiration not only to the Black community but represent every subjugated and marginalized individual. She remains one of the most widely read and renowned contemporary. Through her path-breaking novels and extraordinary poetry collections, she satirizes the deeply ingrained hypocrisy in society in general during her own particularly challenging fights for her individual identity.

Angelou's versatile and dynamic personality, along with her prowess as an astute writer, is evident in her autobiographical works. Unlike her contemporaries, the daring author sets aside all social barriers and hesitations to unravel every embedded layer of her intricate life in a detailed and organic manner. Regarding the autobiographical style of Maya Angelou, critic Hilton Als refers to her as "the pioneer of self-exposure" who has laid bare every page of her life before society. Mary Jane Lupton also notes that in an interview, Maya Angelou herself said, "I think I am the only serious writer who has chosen the autobiographical form as the main form to carry my work, my expression" (Lupton 39).

The autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a coming-of-age story that delves into the true self of the narrator, exploring the intersectionality of race and gender, class and identity in the segregated American South.

The book is replete with multiple perspectives, one of which is the kaleidoscopic aspect. The term "kaleidoscope," as defined in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* refers to "a situation, pattern, etc. containing a lot of different parts that are always changing." This aspect uses multiple perspectives or angles to reveal a multi-dimensional portrayal of a subject, situation, character, or theme in a narrative. The present paper will analyze the first autobiography of the author, Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, through the lens of a kaleidoscope.

The use of this aspect in the narrative is significant because it allows the author to explore the nuances and contradictions of her own experiences while also commenting on broader social and cultural issues, such as racism, sexism, and the trauma that shaped her understanding of the world around her.

Through the subjective nature of her experiences and commentary on the complex African-American life during her time, the author immerses readers in her world of pain, suffering, tribulation, resilience, with her eventual emergence, thereby exposing the “harshness of Black Southern life” (Angelou 18).

For instance, Angelou, at one particular point in the novel, portrays the bullying by white boys whose “cement faces and eyes of hate would be so searing.” This can be ascribed to the fact that the penetrative nature of their stare was so lustful and hate-filled that it could have “burned the clothes off you if they happened to see you lounging in the main Street downtown on Saturday” (18). The author comments that the fear of being lynched by that notorious White group within the Black community in Stamps was morbidly frightening and further subjugated Blacks.

In another chapter, the author delves into further evidence of racial prejudice where she pictures the inhuman treatment of Blacks at the hands of Whites. This prejudice is shown to be deeply rooted by the sentence uttered by a White dentist who declined to treat Marguerite’s tooth, saying loathingly, “I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (189).

The kaleidoscopic shade of Blacks deportment towards Whites can be traced in the contrasting thought process of Momma Henderson and Marguerite. Momma Henderson upholds the ideology that “the less you say to White folks (even powhitetrash) the better” (28). On the other hand, Marguerite is infuriated with her grandmother’s thoughts and wants to “throw a handful of black pepper in their (white folk) faces” (29). She declares, “As a species, we were an abomination” (181) in the domineering White society. Her continuous protest and rebellious spirit cannot accept the disdainful approach of society, and she asserts, “I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death” (183).

From this daring defiance of any subjugation imposed on Blacks, the strong rebellion of Marguerite against White domination with vibrant abomination surfaces when her White mistress, Mrs. Cullinan, does not care to make any effort to call her by her full name. Instead, she prefers to call her ‘Mary’, a name that, while being relatively shorter and easier to say, also

dwarfs and minimizes her identity as an individual. Marguerite decides to teach her White mistress a lesson. She goes to the kitchen and, along with several other pieces, breaks Mrs. Cullinan's favorite "china from Virginia". It would not be an overstatement to say that this vengeful act turns out to be Marguerite's first victory over White domination when Mrs. Cullinan blatantly calls her full name, "Margaret, goddamn it, her name's Margaret!" (110). Yet, Mrs. Cullinan is unaware that she still has not used the correct name. In response to this intentional breaking of china crockery, Dolly McPherson comments, "In doing so, she affirms her individuality and value," further adding only after that indispensable rebellion was she able, "to lose herself, psychologically from the dehumanizing atmosphere of her environment" (McPherson 45).

Thus, in response to the sophisticated reality of racial prejudice and gender biases present in her contemporary society, the portrayal of Marguerite's character is remarkable. She feels imprisoned and helpless in the overbearing White world, where she is not allowed to act outside her mere assigned role of being the so-called inferior Black female. Paradoxically, her grandmother's constant efforts to train her not to cross racial boundaries and act within her assigned gender role become the reason for the explosion of her tolerance. It eventually gave her the courage to break the cage of patriarchy and racial biases, thus reviving and re-establishing her individual identity.

Here, Momma Henderson's non-resistance to White domination is comparable to Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemonic consent" (Choudhary 5), an idea where Gramsci suggests the agonizing situation of subalterns is because of their silent consent to the supremacy of bourgeois class. Many times, the pitiable condition of subalterns, or Dalits in Indian society, has been compared to that of Blacks in a White-dominated society. They have been deprived of their individual rights and exploited by the bourgeois class. Whether we take the example of the subaltern Bakha from *Untouchable*, a novel written by Mulk Raj Anand, or Velutha from *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, or Momma Henderson, Uncle Willie, and other Blacks from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, all of them have been delineated on the canvas of the pathetic life experience of the characters, which tells the miserable story of these people afflicted by racial prejudice.

On the contrary, Marguerite's defiance in the present novel against the oppressor incites the post-modern outcry of a Black female protagonist who not only raises her voice against racial

discrimination but also strongly asserts herself to vouch for her female identity. The trauma of rape that shook her entire childhood later becomes the reason for Marguerite's literary exploration. After the malicious encounter with Mr. Freeman, she began to descend into a dark, lonely, and agonizing world. She was morbidly afraid to confide in anyone about the rape incident. Angelou expresses her mental anguish, helplessness, and hopelessness with these words, "I knew that I was dying and, in fact, I longed for death, but I didn't want to die anywhere near Mr. Freeman. I knew that even now he wouldn't have allowed death to have me unless he wished it to" (82). With the help of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a Black aristocrat, and Marguerite's ideal lady, she finds solace in the realm of literature. Marguerite's long silence was broken by Mrs. Flowers, who once explained to her, "Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals. . . . Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That's good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning" (Angelou 98). Angelou herself asserted that Mrs. Flowers was, "the lady who threw me my first lifeline" (93). Giving Marguerite a ray of hope and inspiration, she threw the rope and pulled her away from the abysmal well of misery. She made Marguerite proud to be Black just by being herself.

The author embarks on an Intrepid voyage of self-assertion and self-worth by not only exposing the deeply rooted racial prejudices and conflicts in the White-dominated society but also laying bare the trauma she and many other black women go through as children, thus exploring another shed of the kaleidoscope. The disclosure of sexual harassment in African-American society by the author is worrisome. The growing cases of sexual abuse against women in general and African-American women, in particular, are horrific. She has explored gender identity and marked the trauma of rape in a gruesome manner.

Time and again, Black women have been assaulted sexually as well as mentally, whether by their White masters or their racial-ethnic groups. They have been marginalized twice first for being female and second for being Black. Referring to historians, such as Higginbotham (1992) and Hines (1989), Tillman wrote, ". . . throughout African-American women's economic history in the United States, sexual abuse has been identified as an occupational hazard. For example, during slavery, African women's bodies were considered accessible at all times to the slave

master” (Tillman 60). Not only did the Black woman endure an inexplicable ordeal, but also found it unthinkable and out of her bounds to ask for justice, hence facing barriers to disclosing assault. He also observed that “African American women are generally reluctant to disclose publicly or privately about their assault” (Tillman 64). They find it shameful to face society and often consider themselves guilty. Such was the plight of Marguerite and others of her race. The tragic irony of this entire abominable and despicable situation was that she was assaulted by a Black man who, apart from being a man of her own race, was also a father figure to her. Before meeting Mrs. Flowers, for an extended period she continued to blame herself for the death of her seducer, Mr. Freeman. Her counselling by Mrs. Flowers triggered her sense of self. Once regained, she finally could do justice to her self-existence.

Maya Angelou firmly and boldly rejected conventional slavery and gender roles to declare a war against racism and social prejudice. Referring to Hilton Als’ (2020) observation, Zaini and Hasan Khan wrote, “Angelou’s witnessing of the evil in her society, as directed towards Black women, shaped Angelou’s young life and informed her views into adulthood” (Zaini 182).

Angelou also satirizes the male chauvinistic patriarchal system where the female victim has to endure brutal and offensive remarks and retorts from society. The malicious treatment of Mr. Freeman’s lawyer made Marguerite feel as if she “had raped Mr. Freeman” (84). It is ironic that to get justice, the rape victim must go through the same pain and anguish once again.

However, Marguerite’s strong will and the love and support of her well-wishers encourage and propel her to spread her wings in the open air and touch the sky. She finds the courage to face the world to no longer underestimate herself. Regardless of her color, she continues to move forward. Unlike her earlier self-perspective of being “dirty like mud” and an “ugly black dream” (02), she believes in the words of Uncle Willie, “Ritie, don’t worry cause you ain’t pretty. Plenty pretty women I seen digging ditches or worse. You smart. I swear to God, I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind,” (68) and embraces her self-esteem.

Leaving behind her rape trauma, racial discrimination, and abandonment by her parents, for the first time in her life, in San Francisco, Marguerite “perceived herself as part of something”. With her trauma behind her, she enters a new chapter of her life. In that city, Marguerite finds her freedom, with all the shackles of patriarchy and racism losing their malicious power when faced with her strong determination. She takes inspiration from her once-

heard story of Mr. Red Leg, “Anything that works against you can also work for you once you understand the Principle of Reverse” (222). Throughout her journey, from Momma Henderson to her mother, and from her mother to her father, she goes through diverse life experiences. Her escape from her father’s home to the junkyard, as a protest against the harshness of life, does not scare her; rather, she senses the freedom inherent in there, which is yet another step towards maturity. Marguerite’s stay at the junkyard makes her more self-sustained and independent. Eugenia Collier interprets the escape from California to Arkansas as a “further step in Maya’s journey toward awareness” (Collier 22). Angelou infers her roller coaster journey of life in these words, “I reasoned that I had given up some youth for knowledge, but my gain was more valuable than the loss” (Angelou 257).

The protagonist, Marguerite, strives to challenge the patriarchy and live life on her own terms. Refusing to stay in the eternal trauma of rape, she chooses to soar higher into the vast open spaces of the boundless sky. She becomes a street car conductor, and irrespective of societal prejudice, she pursues her dream career. Mary Jane Lupton says, “She challenges the patriarchal order by becoming the first black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco” (Lupton 79). Her opposition to male patriarchy and racism streamlines the way for future generations.

Not only does she strive to establish her individual identity, but she also paves the way for humanity and motherhood within her. The seed of generosity and kind-heartedness can be traced to the character of the protagonist, where, after realizing her pregnancy, she could not resist the mother within herself, and decides to be a strong-willed self-sufficient, independent mother. The embrace of the child by Maya, as she calls him “totally my possession” (Angelou 289), symbolizes Maya’s embrace of ‘Self’, which she had lost earlier because of the trauma and miseries of her life. Sidonie Ann Smith says, “With the birth of her child Maya is herself born into a mature engagement with the forces of life” (Smith 374).

The use of the kaleidoscopic lens serves as a powerful and flexible tool to explore the complex web of relationships and ideas that exist among the people of African-American society, particularly those ideas and relationships based on power and domination. Through the description of her own life experiences, the author sheds light on the devastating effects that these incidents can have on individuals and communities. The present autobiography is a testimony to the strength and resilience of the limitless potential and capability existing in every

human being, even in the face of overwhelming adversity. The story not only satirizes the white hegemony, but also the male patriarchal system.

Conclusion

It can be stated that the female protagonist, Marguerite goes through an enormous transformation. Just like a kaleidoscope, her constantly transforming, resilient, constructive, and progressive personality inspires the readers and illuminates the realm of Black female literature while raising the bar to a very formidable level. Through the autobiographical representation of herself, the author has been successful in portraying a strong Black female character who becomes the epitome of liberty and Black female strength in a predominantly White society. According to Angelou's biographers, "Readers, especially women, and in particular Black women, took the book to heart" (Gillespie 101). The book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* became the most inspiring and influential book of Black feminism. Thus, the valiant portrayal of the protagonist is a scathing and penetrating reply to all social biases across boundaries and societies in the world at large.

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