



**Exploring the Elements of Segregation: An Analysis of Maya Angelou's
*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***

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Abstract:

This paper examines how Black women strived hard for survival in the patriarchal world and emerged victorious in the adverse conditions posed to them. These hardships were as a result of anatomy, biological determinism and sexuality. The text selected for highlighting these anomalies is Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Black women's spiritual, emotional and intellectual prowess as well as the sense of beauty, strength, and dignity are exalted by Angelou. She discusses the treatment of Black women, their battle for justice and their daily struggles. She reinvents the Black woman's image throughout her autobiographies, positioning herself as a role model for African American women. She also uses these several roles, incarnations and identities to link her personal past to the systemic oppression she has experienced.

Keywords: Female Subjugation, Segregation, Identity, Gender Discrimination.

Introduction

Maya Angelou, born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, was an acclaimed autobiographer, verse-maker, historian, lyricist, playwright, dancer, producer, director, performer, singer and civil rights activist. Angelou is eulogized as a new kind of writer, one of the first African-American women who had the courage and audaciousness to talk over their private lives. Angelou's autobiographies set a precedent and continue to serve as a source of inspiration for other women writers. She became a widely recognized and highly respected figure who powerfully and effectively brought attention to the issues faced by Black people. Her literary works explore the overarching issues of economic, racial, and sexual oppression. This selected work is celebrated for shedding light on the adversity faced by Black people, the quiet yet formidable strength of women, and the enduring importance of compassion, social justice, and human values. She received numerous awards and honorary degrees. She had a unique and pioneering writing style. Angelou had a difficult childhood due to her parents' tumultuous marriage and subsequent divorce. Angelou spent much of her childhood in the care of her doting paternal grandmother.

The autobiography of Maya Angelou is a major source of analysing the fallout of racial prejudice, sexism, community and politics on a Black girl living in the rural backwaters. Her struggle in recovering from the trauma of her sexual abuse at a tender age and her resilience and willpower with which Maya overpowered the difficulties. While Angelou's personal journey forms the heart of the narrative, it extends beyond the individual to embrace her family, her community and the social forces that seek to define and confine her. Through it all, her voice rises as a testament to survival, resilience, and the enduring power of the human spirit. This development unfolds through her confrontations with racial discrimination, sexual abuse, and a complex sense of identity and sexuality. It traces her journey through shifting careers in search of her true calling, the delicate balance between motherhood and professional ambition,

the challenges of marriage, and the weight of inner conflict — all while navigating a profound quest to reclaim her ancestral roots.

As an African American, Maya Angelou had to face firsthand racial biases, hatred, inequality and injustice in Arkansas. During a visit to her mother, Freeman, her mother's boyfriend, molested Maya. In order to take revenge for the sexual assault, Maya's uncles murdered the boyfriend. The traumatic sequence of events affected her immensely. At such a tender age, Maya was overwhelmed with guilt, believing that her confession of the trauma had played a role in the man's death, and as a result, she remained silent for six years. During this period, and later in her teenage years, she returned to live with her grandmother. Maya Angelou's passion for reading and writing was evident from a very early age. During her pre-teen and adolescent years, she channeled her creativity into essays, poetry and personal diary entries. Upon returning to Arkansas, she began to develop a deep love for poetry, immersing herself in the works of Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe. As World War II approached, she moved back to her mother, who had settled in Oakland, California. Maya attended Mission High School and took dance and drama courses at the California Labor School. During World War II, Maya applied to join the Women's Army Corps, but her application was rejected due to her involvement with the California Labor School, which was alleged to have Communist ties. Her application was spurned due to her ties to the California Labor School, which was suspected of having Communist affiliations. Hankering for livelihood, she applied for a position as a streetcar conductor, although she was only fifteen years old. With a large number of men called away to military service, many positions were left unfilled, opening the door for women to step into the workforce. Although Angelou initially faced racial discrimination in her attempts to apply, she was undeterred and persisted until she achieved her goal.

Finally, the company relented and handed her an application form. Since she had not yet reached the legal working age, Maya falsified her application by claiming she was 19. Her

persistence paid off when she was hired and was a trailblazer, making history as the first African American woman to work as a streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Angelou was employed for a semester before deciding to return to school. In the final year of school, she became pregnant and gave birth to a son soon after graduating from High School. She left home at 16 and took on the difficult life of a single mother, supporting herself and her son by working as a waitress and cook, but she had not given up on her talents for music, dance, performance and poetry. Maya's early life is the focus of this first autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). The book tells the story of her life up until the age of sixteen. In the book, Maya gives vivid account of the struggle she went through while growing up as an African-American woman. This work also provides us with glimpses of the societal and political scenario of the 1930s. She also shows how she overcame these issues through dogged determination, perseverance, her words and writings. Anyone can get the measure of the intellectual depth, intense musing, great insight and the sensitivity of Maya Angelou from her famous quote: "I have learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel". The autobiography of Maya Angelou is a major source of analysing the fallout of racial prejudice, sexism, community, and politics on a Black girl living in the rural backwaters. Her struggle in recovering from the trauma of her sexual abuse at a tender age and her resilience and determination with which she overcame the predicaments. While Angelou's personal experiences take center stage, the narrative also encompasses her family and community, along with the circumstances that confine her and her enduring efforts to celebrate survival and the human spirit.

Elements of Segregation

Maya Angelou is eulogized as one of the finest writers of America. As a writer par excellence, Maya also dabbled in the arena of dancing, singing, script writing, direction, and

acting thus bringing laurels for her. In addition to these attributes, her political activism was also a feather in her cap. She was always emotionally attached to Stamps, Arkansas, where she spent her early ten years. Her writing reflects the culture of her people. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first and foremost of Angelou's autobiographies. Maya and her elder brother Bailey are sent to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas, after being separated from their parents. Maya is just three years old at the time and the story unfolds from that point until she gives birth to her first child at the age of sixteen. In this novel, Angelou describes in detail her teenage years as an intelligent but uncertain black woman growing up in the 1930s in South America and subsequently in the 1940s in California. Through her writing, Maya defied deeply rooted societal norms and bolstered myriad women to find their voice and strength. She has been successful in breaking the stereotype about women to be frail, submissive and a mere sex toy. She broke the chains of patriarchy, misogyny and parochial outlook.

On Easter Sunday, Maya fails to complete her poem recitation in church and, overwhelmed by shame and humiliation, she flees in a fit of tears and laughter, losing control of herself in the process. Bailey sticks up for Maya when people actually make fun of her to her face, wielding his charisma to put others in their place. Momma survived the odds stacked against her and became a successful businesswoman. During the Great Depression, she managed to keep the Store afloat at a time when numerous white-owned businesses across the country were shutting down. In Angelou's autobiography, Momma emerges as a strong, determined survivor. Momma chooses her battles well. In what is known as the Great Migration, between one and two million black farmers left the South from 1914 to 1930 in search of work in northern cities, where factory owners promised but never provided high-wage jobs.

In the novel, Angelou reflects on her adolescence as an intelligent yet troubled young Black woman growing up in the American South during the 1930s and later in California in the 1940s. After their parents divorced, Maya and Bailey went to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, in the small rural town of Stamps, Arkansas. Annie, whom everyone lovingly called Momma, ran the only store that served the Black community in Stamps. She develops into the moral compass of Maya's youth. Little Maya and Bailey struggle with the pain of having their parents reject them and leave them. The notion that she is an ugly child who will never be seen as a beautiful and graceful white woman torments Maya deeply. She feels inferior to other black kids. On an Easter Sunday, she strives to complete the recitation by her poem at the church. Feeling humiliated and embarrassed of the failure, Maya ran out of the building with tears in her eyes and involuntarily urinated. People mocked her, but her brother Bailey skillfully diffused the awkward situation with his charm. When the judge subpoenaed her, Momma presented herself as "Mrs. Henderson," and while the white community found the incident amusing, the Black community regarded it as a powerful testament to Momma's prominence.

In Maya's memory, her father Big Bailey seemed entirely out of place in the rural South. He dressed in fitted wool clothes and spoke English far more eloquently than even the school principal. His actions show that he made a mutual effort to leave a lasting impression. In Momma's family, his brazenness shattered the peaceful balance of regularity. Despite working as a porter at a hotel in California, Big Bailey carried himself with middle-class traits, evident in his car, accent and clothing. Angelou never clarifies how he acquired these possessions, leaving open the question of whether he saved his earnings or resorted to other, possibly unlawful, methods. In fact, in Big Bailey's generation, there were not many legal ways for clever black men with ambitions to succeed. During the Great Migration between 1914 and 1930, one to two million Black farmers headed north in search of well-paying industrial jobs

that employers had dangled as a promise but ultimately failed to deliver. The shift from rural communities to urban cities severed Black people's connection to their roots and traditions, leaving them adrift in a society where conforming to white standards of appearance, speech, and behavior seemed the only path to success. Despite being uprooted and thrust into the loud and unfamiliar city of St. Louis, Maya manages to display a remarkable ability to adapt to her new surroundings.

She meets several strong-willed and eccentric relatives who help her feel better about herself, but she does not find true pleasure in her association with her mother. She recalls one of her uncles telling her often to value her intelligence rather than worry about her appearance. Now that she is able to put herself in a larger familial context, Maya may discover more about her past before being exiled, including heartwarming, encouraging tales about her brother, Bailey. She finds out that when Bailey was three years old, he assumed the responsibility for teaching his sister to walk. A German family raised Maya's maternal grandmother, Baxter, who appeared almost entirely white in complexion. She chose to pass as white although she married a black man, and by starting networks with the criminal underworld, she was able to secure her financial future. Maya's uncles and grandfather are gruff city dwellers who have developed the necessary toughness to protect them from exploitation and abuse and her mother's bizarre way of life appears to blend in perfectly with Maya's odd family. Maya despite her unfamiliar surroundings, has identified herself in a more familial setting where "Angelou feels a duty to appreciate her benefactors and hates coming back to Stamps." She quickly realizes that she has not adjusted well, and the criminal activities of the St. Louis family she encounters directly affect her on a personal level.

Just as Maya begins to settle and grow in St. Louis, Mr Freeman's sexual abuse overwhelms her with guilt. This incident reveals that Maya has never truly come to terms with the loneliness rooted in her parents' abandonment. She claims, "When Freeman held her, she

desired that he should not leave her, as she felt at home with him” (Angelou 79). Maya is taken advantage of by Mr Freeman because she hasn’t had a lot of personal affection or touch and she mistakes his exploitation of her with the lack of physical care she didn’t get as a child. The situation is so clouded in Maya’s mind that she explains Mr Freeman’s intimidation to murder Bailey as proof that she did something immoral, but she is unable to specify what. Mr Freeman takes advantage of Maya’s sympathetic nature, particularly her propensity to show concern for those experiencing similar neglect and suffering. Maya demonstrates that she wasted a lot of time watching Mr Freeman as he miserably waited for Vivian’s arrival in the evenings, perhaps in an effort to presage the rape. He ignores her for weeks following the two distinct instances of sexual molestation, which exacerbates her emotions of rejection and guilt. Although Maya increasingly withdraws from the outside world and retreats into the library, books prove to be more of a comfort than a burden. Her favorite stories and fairy tales, however, reinforce the culturally accepted notion that women cannot be protagonists, which fuels her desire to have been born a man. With books as her companions, she no longer craves or needs Mr. Freeman’s attention. She had shown a desire for affection, which Mr Freeman used as justification for molesting her. When she tells him she wants nothing to do with him, he accuses her of having enjoyed his closeness before. Momma is depicted in Angelou’s novel as a resilient survivor who never gave up. Momma picks wise battles. For instance, Momma lends her assistance to those who find themselves entangled in such confrontations despite the fact that she does not make a point of confronting white people about their racism. Despite the risk to themselves, she and Willie help a black man escape from a lynch mob, displaying their quiet bravery. When Momma reveals herself as the “Mrs. Henderson” the judge subpoenaed, Angelou says that while whites thought the incident was funny, the black community remembers it as a testament to Momma’s prominence.

Conclusion:

The study focuses on Angelou's personal experiences, her family and community, as well as the circumstances which manacles her existence and her endeavors to break these shackles. Over time, the narrator's perseverance and unwavering determination drive her to assert her leeway, and she successfully carves out a place for herself in social activism. This transformation happens by overwhelming the predicaments of racial prejudice, sexual abuse, her carnal desires, changing of jobs to finding a suitable place in society, balancing her career and motherhood, marriage, inner peace by reconciling oneself with whatever one has achieved, portrayed by applying the metaphor, which changes its form with the passage of autobiographical segments but remains the same in its content. The success that Angelou and her community achieve in American society brings the personification of the 'song' metaphor to life.

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