

# Injustice of Racism in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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## Abstract

Angelou's goal, beginning with her first autobiography, was to "tell the truth about the lives of black women", but her goal evolved, in her later volumes, to document the ups and downs of her own life. Life has not gifted her better experiences but bitter ones. She has the power to struggle everything. This paper entitled "Injustice of Racism in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" aims to discuss the difficulties encountered by the writer as a girl, young mother, daughter and black woman in the society and how has boosted her spirits to rise from the struggle under the title injustice of racism. Her works stand as testimony for her suffering as well as success.

**Keywords:** Racism, Identity, Motherhood, Family, Travel.

Female struggle for liberation had also been achieved gradually, when the women fought with courage; and their pride played an important part in their novels, critically acclaimed on the subject matters of African- American autobiography. Dolly A McPherson remarks:

Black writes have tried, by the use of autobiography and, a lesser degree, other literary modes, to examine to themselves and articulate their findings, not only in an effort to celebrate their unique experiences, but also to explain their situation to that group of the society, which could, if it chose, alter the conditions of the writers lives.

Angelou, as a woman, demonstrated the formation of her own cultural identity throughout her narratives. Angelou presented herself as a role model for African- American women by reconstructing the Black woman's image throughout her autobiographies, and has used her many roles, incarnations, and identities to connect the layers of oppression with her personal history. Angelou's themes of the individual's strength and ability to overcome appeared throughout Angelou's autobiographies as well. The woman Angelou presented in her autobiographies, especially *Caged Bird*, influenced the woman Angelou became. According to Manora, three characters in *Caged Bird*, Angelou's mother Vivian, her grandmother Annie Henderson, and Mrs. Flowers, collaborated to "form a triad which serves as the critical matrix in which the child is nurtured and sustained during her journey through Southern Black girl hood".

The paper entitled Injustice of Racism in Maya Angelou's Autobiographical Works *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a work which a part autobiography, part fiction and part social history written by the African - American writer Maya Angelou. It is a coming - of- age story that illustrates how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma. The book begins when three year old Maya and her elder brother are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother and ends when Maya becomes a mother at the age of seventeen. In the course of the *Caged Bird*, ,Maya transforms from the victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self- possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice.

Angelou uses her autobiography to explore subjects such as racism, identity, rape and literacy. Maya, the central character has been called “a symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America. Angelou's treatment of racism brings a thematic unity to the book and resistance to racism is the main theme that is dealt with in this paper. While selecting a title for the book, Angelou turned to Paul Laurence Dunbar, an African American poet whose works she had admired for years. The title of the book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* comes from the third stanza of his poem *Sympathy*.

The incidents encountered by the characters in this book are due to the overt racism of the white neighbours. The inhuman behavior of the whites is depicted when the Black people hear about the Ku Klux Klan raiders, the whites who terrorized the blacks and their allies, murdering, lynching, raping and beating intended to protect the rights and interests of the white Americans. Momma, Maya's grandmother hides her son Willie in a potato bin all night while the white men scour the black section of Stamps for a scapegoat. “His confidence that my uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear”. (14)

Maya's grandmother is another example of the evil of racism. One day three poor white children approached the store. The children mocked Momma by mimicking her gestures and Maya cried with impotent rage and thought of getting her uncle's rifle to do harm to her. The title *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is apt as Maya Angelou compares herself and her entire race to the bird which is locked in a cage but does not sing. A bird sings sometimes to find solace to itself and this is what Maya Angelou has done to share her experience.

Angelou in her autobiographical fiction expressed the various forms of resistance of the blacks against racism. Despite recognizing the personally empowering nature of these instances of resistance, Maya's descriptions illustrate that such resistance serves to save the African - American community from drowning in the inevitable desperation. During the months she spent writing the book, practically withdrew from the world. She'd set the bar high. Her ambition was to write a book that would expose the Black experience and affirm the human spirit. She more than achieved her goal. She wrote a coming -of -age story that has become a modern classic.

-Marcia Ann Gillespie, 2008 (41)

The structure of the text, which resembles a series of short stories, is not chronological but rather thematic. Walker, in his 1993 article about *Caged Bird*, Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form, focuses on the book's structure, and describes how it supports her presentation of racism. According to Walker, critics had neglected analyzing its structure, choosing to focus instead on its themes, which he feels neglects the political nature of the book. He states, "One serves Angelou and *Caged Bird* better by emphasizing how form and political content work together". (42) Angelou structures her book so that it presents a series of lessons about how to resist racism and oppression. The progression Maya goes through thematically unifies the book, something that stands in contrast, arranges, and organizes her vignettes often undermined the chronology of her childhood by juxtaposing the events of one chapter with the events of preceding and following ones so that they too comment on each other.

To sum up, the title *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is apt as Maya Angelou compares herself and her entire race to the bird which is locked in a cage but does not sing. A bird sings sometimes to find solace to itself and this is what Maya Angelou has done to share her experience. Angelou in her autobiographical fiction expressed the various forms of resistance of the blacks against racism. Despite recognizing the personally empowering nature of these instances of resistance, Maya's descriptions illustrate that such resistance serves to save the African - American community from drowning in the desperation and despair that envelopes them. The work serves valuable resource from the psychological and human development perspectives also. *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* covers tough issue such as the rape and racism, sexual development and gender issues, identity, and the impact between family members, and the main characters in the play.

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