



Slave Narratives & Black Autobiography in- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract

Autobiography by Black people in America that took the form of slave narratives were written to show White people that slaves were indeed human beings, with all the same human qualities attributed to white people. To the modern individual, slavery of any kind is an undeniable wrong. Although enslavement has not been completely wiped from the earth, it is no longer justified on the surface level of our society; such as it was in early America. The most thought-provoking aspect that rose from slavery in America was the slave narrative. Since the abolition of slavery and the thinning of the final generation of former slaves, slave narratives eventually stopped being produced. The end of slaves did not mean the end of their place in literature. Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* also defines the black woman reality as -the Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time.

Keywords: Autobiographers, Burden of Blackness, Multicultural, Slave Narrative, Superwoman.

Angelou's narrative combines two characteristics of the slave narrative. It demonstrates both the narrative of movements and narrative of confinement. She charts their journey toward autonomy. Abandoned by her parents, raped by her mother's boyfriend, separated from her grandmother, the young Angelou is imprisoned and unable to claim her own identity. She meets racism in its worst forms all through her life. Autobiographies such as the slave narratives were historical treatises that documented the lives of the people associated with the writer,

as well as the life of the writer. Slave narratives were written to appeal to the mercy of their White readers. These narratives are presently useful to help uncertain Black people define their identities from the life stories of former slaves. The slave narratives give Black Americans encounters with their past through the words of their ancestors. Such narratives were written with two goals: to help the individual assert their identity in the world and serve the purpose of the abolition movement. It is a fact that most Black people during slave-era America could not read or write and didn't have the time or freedom to think in terms of self-identity, yet the importance of the slave narratives to the life of Black Americans cannot be undermined. Black writers of autobiography were especially rooted in this historical format and often left out important information about the writer's personal life.

Recently, Black women have started writing more personal autobiographies that pay attention to the personal details of their lives, such as how they handle different kinds of relationship situations, family issues, financial problems and personal events that could affect their acceptance in their communities, their workplaces, and society in general. Reactions to personal autobiographies often prevent Black women from revealing important personal and cultural information. The concern with reader responses calls attention to the fact that the readers impact the interpretation of the autobiography, based on the readers' cultural backgrounds, personal idiosyncrasies, and other factors, such as geographic location. Aside from helping race relations, autobiography can also help with gender relations, the relationships between persons with different sexual preferences, and even religious differences.

The importance of Black women writing autobiography, and of it being useful in multicultural venues, cannot be overemphasized. Black women are recognizing their responsibility for telling their stories so that others can gain first hand, invaluable information about the individuals as well as the communities from which they come. There are several modern black female writers who carry on the tradition of analysing slavery and making sure that it is not forgotten. Among these women are Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Octavia Butler, who have revived the slave tradition in their quest to reveal its dark underbelly and its continued effects on people.

The description of Black women was negative in the early literature about Black people, often presenting them as fat and doting mammies or as seductive temptresses and Jezebels, seducing and conquering with sex (Christian, 1985; Fox-Genovese, 1988). Still other stereotypical images of Black women include the submissive, unattractive, cooking-and-cleaning Aunt Jemima and the manipulative, controlling "Superwoman" (Bracks, 1998). The only way these images can be changed is for Black women to do it themselves, by writing their own stories about their lives. This simple act of penning one's own stories is a way for Black women to create their own identities and negate those created and promoted by White authors, filmmakers, television producers, and others with access to the media.

The need to challenge and reinvent the images of Black people and other people of colour, and particularly women of colour, has led to the establishment of autobiography as an important way of creating new images and encountering old images in multicultural settings. The redefinition of the self through the writing of autobiography places power into the hands of the writer to define who she is and to share her self-identity with the readers. This is the initiation of the changing of global societal views of Black women. A reason to shatter the negative images is that they have resulted in Black women being neglected or treated as inferiors in American society. This has impacted how Black women perceive themselves, as well as how they interact with others.

“There is a need for Black women to write their lives, as much for the correcting of the history of their lives as for the personal benefits they gain from engaging in the process of developing autobiography. The autobiographical process permits the writer to think deeply about her life and to develop a positive self-identity. The creation of autobiography is, in these ways, a therapeutic process that is useful to all who write their lives”. (Harris)

Black Woman autobiographical writing expresses perception that certain things, both positive and negative, that happened in Black community affected their self-identity as much as the positive and negative things that they encountered outside that community. Their writings reflect those themes most important to them—equality for Black people and self-identity, gender, personal challenges and family issues. They think, write and speak from the perspective of a Black woman living in a significantly racist society, where the majority of the people have some sort of bigotry towards Black women. Characteristics of the black autobiography are that the individual and the community are not polarities; there is a community of fundamental identification between ‘I’ and ‘We’. St. Claire Drake maintains:

The genre of the Afro-American autobiography is one in which more intimate aspects of the autobiographer’s personal experience are subordinated to social commentary and reflections upon what it means to be a Negro in a world dominated by White Men. The traumatic effects of the black experience seem to have confessional writing, an intellectual luxury black writers cannot afford. (158)

Maya Angelou is one of most prominent black writers in the United States. Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* defines the black woman reality as the Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time. The oppression in gender was more difficult than the male slave writing. Nelley Mckay states that

“For twentieth-century black women who passed on to their experience: black womanhood was not static or a single ideal. The selves in the stories of the early foremothers reveal black female identity as a process of ongoing reinvention of self under the pressures of race, class and gender oppression” (*Feminism in Academy* 79).

Angelou narrated how Robert Loomis, Random House editor, coaxed her into writing an autobiography: tasking her with the challenge of writing a literary autobiography. As she considered herself a poet and playwright; she repeatedly refused Loomis' requests to write an autobiography until he told her that it was just as well: "He ... said that to write an autobiography—as literature—is almost impossible. I said right then I'd do it." Angelou could not resist the temptation of accepting challenge, that led to the 1970 publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The challenge in Loomis' remark was about the difficulty of writing autobiography as literature. She cared most for her writing: "Writing is a part of my life: cooking is a part of my life. I think it's dangerous to concern oneself too demind much with being an artist."

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) is the first of seven books that Maya Angelou wrote about her life. The others are *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin* and *Getting' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002) and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013). It is the story of the early years of Maya Angelou's life. She meets racism in its worst forms all through her life. Born April 4, 1928 in Saint Louis, Missouri, Maya Angelou's given name was Marguerite Johnson. In her early twenties, she was given the name Maya Angelou after her debut performance as a dancer at the Purple Onion cabaret. The author's father, Bailey Johnson was a naval dietician and her mother Vivian Johnson was a nurse. She has one sibling, a brother named Bailey after their father. When she was about three years old, their parents divorced and the children were sent to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas.

Growing up in Stamps, Angelou learned what it was like to be a black girl in a world whose boundaries were set by whites. She learned what it meant to have to wear old hand-me-downs from a white woman. She went through the humiliation of being refused treatment by a white dentist. As a child she always dreamed of waking to find her "nappy black hair" metamorphosed to a long blond bob because she felt life was better for a white girl than for a black girl. Despite the odds, her grandmother instilled pride in Angelou with religion which was an important element in their home. After five years of being away from their mother the children were sent back to Saint Louis to be with her. This move eventually took a turn for the worst when Angelou was raped by her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman. The devastating act of violence committed against her caused her to become mute for nearly five years. She was sent back to Stamps because no one could handle the grim state Angelou was in. With the constant help of a woman named Mrs. Flowers, Angelou began to evolve into the young girl who had possessed the pride and confidence she once had.

Mrs. Flowers teaches Maya the value of knowledge but at the same time inculcates in her an intolerance for illiteracy. Mrs. Flowers guides Maya's entry into other people's lives through the medium of literature. The friendship between the two women rests on the foundation of literature. She becomes a maternal metaphor for her. She is made to understand the positive power of words. She explains to Maya that "words" mean more than what is the set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning (*Caged Bird* 95). Mrs. Flowers makes tea-cookies for her, reads to her from her favourite 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 grandchild... but for just being Marguerite [Maya] Johnson.” (Caged Bird 98). Francoise Lionnet in his essay:

She [Mrs. Flowers] becomes Maya’s saviour, a sort of tribal deity who helps her re-evaluate her position within the community as well as the community’s virtues. (Lionnet 151).

Mrs. Flowers introduced the young girl to the world out of literary classics, including the works of Charles Dickens. This educational encounter proved to be a vital turning point. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou explains the sensation of listening to Mrs. Flowers as she read from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859): “I heard poetry for the first time in my life Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing.” She is finally able to get Marguerite to talk that her works in themselves were demanding of recitation. The therapy is so effective that it must have carried over into the writer’s poetic career, in the production of such oral poems as *And Still I Rise* and *Phenomenal Woman*.

“You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise
Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders failing down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries.” (*And Still I Rise*)

Angelou’s narrative combines two characteristics of the slave narrative. It demonstrates both the narrative of movements and narrative of confinement. She charts their journey toward autonomy. Abandoned by her parents, raped by her mother’s boyfriend, separated from her grandmother, the young Angelou is imprisoned and unable to claim her own identity. Her journey towards self-discovery takes her from ignorance to knowledge, from silence to speech, from racially oppressed to a liberated life. She travels from Stamps, Arkansas, to Accra, Ghana and back to America. Her story thus echoes the course of the slave narrative. It is an account of the cruelties of slavery and its ultimate hope for emancipation. She states “Each one is an autobiographer... So I think we’re all on journeys, according to how we’re able to travel, overcome, and share what we have learned.”

In *Caged Bird*, she recounts many explosive incidents of the racial abuse she experienced as a child. Momma (grandmother) is their constant source of love and strength. Momma uses her strength solely to guide and protect her family. She never confronts the white community directly. Her resilient power reassures Angelou and the racial prejudice in Stamps could effectively be dealt with her grandmother’s protective influence. Maya’s ties with her grandmother are probably the most important in forming her character. She states:

Although there was always generosity in the Negro Neighbourhood, it was indulged on pain of sacrifice. Whatever was given by Black people to other Blacks was most probably needed as desperately by the donor as by the receiver.... I couldn't understand whites and where they got the right to spend money so lavishly. Of course, I knew God was white too, but no one could have made me believe he was prejudiced. (Caged Bird 48)

Momma takes Angelou to the local dentist to be treated for a severe toothache. The dentist who is ironically named Lincoln, refuses to treat the child, though he is indebted to Momma for a loan she had extended to him during the Depression. As a silent witness to this scene, Angelou suffers not only from the pain of her decayed teeth, but also from the utter humiliation of the dentist's bigotry. She says pathetically "it seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness." (Caged Bird 71).

Angelou reveals the harsh realities of growing up child in South. While she was living in her grandmother's house, her Momma used to sell lunches to the workers in Stamps. In cotton-picking time, the late afternoons revealed the harshness of Black Southern life, which in the early morning had been softened by nature's blessing of grogginess, forgetfulness and the soft lamplight" (9). Momma is the strongest mother figure. She was mocked at by three white poor girls and Angelou elucidates. "When I was ten years old those scruffy children caused me the most painful and confusing experience I had ever had with my grandmother" (29). Momma does nothing against those girls and kept her calm. Angelou shows that Momma wins the contest by her dignity and self-confidence.

Annie Henderson (Momma) wields the economic power to lend money to the whites. She even owes land on which the whites stay. Momma engendered in Angelou a sense of community and collective identity. During the Depression when no one has enough money to buy supplies, Mrs. Henderson employs the barter system to help her neighbours. While living with her, Angelou learns to identify herself as a black-with all the humiliations and disadvantages. She comes to feel a sense of solidarity with the people of her race. The feeling of oneness and sharing is revealed through the concern that members of the community feel for each other. When Bailey does not return home in time from movie, the black neighbours share Momma's concern. One individual's concern becomes the community's concern. Dolly McPherson says that Angelou celebrates the richness and warmth of Southern Black life:

"Caged Bird testifies to the amazing resilience of Black Americans and their ability to cope with the inequities of American racism... [it] bears witness to ... the co-operative alliances that enable Blacks to survive, with grace and exuberance, the most difficult circumstance." (McPherson 37)

Momma also introduces Marguerite to the spiritual side of Black life. Her understanding of Biblical teaching has convinced her that the black are Gods chosen people and He will punish the oppressors of the Blacks. Momma sets a living example to the children. Through the purity of her life and the quality of her

discipline, Mrs. Annie Henderson shows that, by centring one's being in God, one can endure and mitigate the effects of an unjust world. Angelou internalizes these lessons. Under the burden of racism, Momma is unable to perceive the white people as human. She is aware that the whites cannot be confronted directly. She tries to teach her grandchildren to use those strategies of survival. Angelou is so enraged by Momma's subservience that she cries bitterly. When the emotional storm subsides, she looks up at her grandmother's face as "a brown moon that shone on me". She thinks "whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won" (Caged Bird 32). Momma participates the church activities and she turns to faith when she feels threatened. Momma becomes a religious icon for her so she puts her grandmother in a respectful status. While the man who symbolizes the religion, the Pastor is described as:

"The fact that he never bothered to remember our names was insulting, but neither was that slight, alone, enough to make us despise him. But the crime that tipped the scale and made our hate not only just but imperative was his actions at the dinner table. He ate the biggest, brownest and best parts of the chicken at every Sunday meal" (35)

Angelou portrays the confrontation of two mothers in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Momma and Vivian. Unable to accept that they have been abandoned by their parents, the children convince themselves that their mother is dead. They found solace in the illusion of their mother's death because the reality of their abandonment was too terrible to accept. Maya's portrayal of two distinct mothers is rooted from her split character: both African and American. She moves back and forth to her African origin and her American self, and she lives in the middle of two mothers, Vivian, and Momma. Her mother taught Angelou values that were both feminine and strong. She helped guide her daughter through motherhood: a time when she was pregnant as an unwed mother.

Maya Angelou's significance as an autobiographer rests upon her exceptional ability to narrate her life story as a Black American woman in the twentieth century, in the changing phase of international race relations. In doing so, she is furthering the tradition and conventions of the slave narratives. As an articulator of the collective heritage, she interprets particulars of a culture for a wide audience both Black and white, men and women. She falls squarely within the Black autobiographical traditions because of the numerous parallels one discovers between her prose and that of other Black autobiographers and she also falls outside the tradition because of sharp differences between her autobiographical storytelling and of others. Angelou's use of self-parody is something new in Black autobiography. Through the careful selection of attitudes that lead to self-parody, Angelou is also able to reveal the genesis of her character and personality as she views her growth from the perch of adulthood. She possesses significant ideas, feelings, emotions and a view of life in all its forms as well as the competency, skill and technical excellence to portray them effectively and with characteristic elegance. Angelou, like several other Black women autobiographers, makes use of the genre of autobiography to embody literature as a celebration of life. In celebrating literature and life, she presents the 'self' in all its manifestations, exploring, revealing and reflecting on images, personal and intimate, extending her character to

almost mythic proportions, a symbol of womanhood as she “sings her sassy song of herself”, creating from the end of the *Caged Bird* a new beginning, relocating the centre to luminous place in a volume yet to be.

Angelou attempted to invent new identity for black woman in terms of physical beauty that many white women regarded as one of the aspects of evaluating women's virtues. Angelou blended her influential voice in her poems correspondingly to sustain her powerful independent identity as a black woman. In one of her comments on her personality as a feminist writer, Angelou stated that "I am a feminist; I've been female for a long time now. I'd be stupid not to be on my own side" (qtd. in Adell, 1994:107). Angelou disclosed the ability to control her life as a feminist writer and dealt with the woes of black women even though if those women are regarded to be "limited" (Lupton 71).

Angelou's personal experience and black identity assist her to stand bravely against racism and emancipation of African-American woman. Her creations are blended by the perspectives of the pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance like Langston Hughes who is known as the poet Laureate of the renaissance and Paul Laurence Dunbar who is known as the great black poet of the Nineteenth century. She shares some of these poets' aspects like the question for equality and freedom for black community. Angelou describes by rendering specific and concrete images to suggest how the white people regarded the black woman as weak, filthy and uneducated. She specifies her quest to be free and equal to the whites through her affirmation that she will be free and equal to the rest of America. She skilfully manifested the status of African-American woman under the white dominant culture. She divulges how African-American women have been deprived from being fully accepted as human beings by the mainstream American culture. Angelou included her own voice in most of her poems to re-count the miserable story of black woman in the world of the whites. She criticized this world by using feminist voice in her poems through figurative language which emphasized the powerlessness of black women who experienced severe mental conflicts because of the dominant hegemonic culture of the whites.

Angelou's narratives depict the ruthless treatment and harmful stereotypes practiced against black women through the interaction of the two cultures: black and white. Yet, she portrays black women to be strong and confident, though their resistance is too slender. She challenges the traditional perspectives that present the women as pathetic and passive to give a new outlook that black women are resilient and competent. Maya Angelou as a black activist, attempted to change the perspectives of the readers, especially towards women who were being subjugated by the dominant world of men for a long time. By doing so, Angelou has given readers a new impression about black women who can challenge the cultural norms that make women an object. Angelou connects the feminist voice as the vital role of women in society and contrasted it with the idea of being independent.

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