

A Study of Racism and Related Perspectives in Maya

Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Project submitted to the University of Calicut in partial

Fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

English and History

by

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Declaration

I, Soubhagya Lakshmi, hereby declare that this project entitled **A Study of Racism and Related Perspectives in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*** submitted to the University of Calicut in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and History, is a research work done by me under the supervision and guidance of Mrs. Nahna kamarudheen V, Assistant Professor, Department of English and History, Christ college (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda.

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Certificate

This is to certify that this project entitled **A Study of Racism and Related Perspectives in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*** is a record of research work carried out by Ms. Soubhagya Lakshmi under my supervision and guidance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and History submitted to the University of Calicut.

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Introduction

I know why the caged bird sings, the first among the seven volumes series work by famous American author Maya Angelou (Marguerite Annie Johnson). Maya Angelou an American poet, civil rights activist, and also an author of three books of essays, several poetries and also famous for her seven volume autobiographies which reflects her early childhood and the sufferings she had to go through. An acclaimed poet, story teller, activist, an autobiographer, Maya Angelou was born in St. Louis, Missouri. She had a broad career as a dancer, actress, composer, singer and Hollywood's first female black director, but became most famous as a writer, editor, playwright, and a poet. She also worked under, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. She has also served two presidential committees, for Gerald Ford in 1975 and Jimmy Carter in 1977. She was awarded the national medal of arts by President Bill Clinton in the year 2000. In 2010, she was also awarded the presidential medal for freedom, the highest civilian honor in the U.S, by president Barack Obama. She was awarded with about 50 honorary degrees before her death. One of her most famous works is this one *I know why the caged bird sings*, which deals with her early years in St. Louis, Stamps, Arkansas where she lived with her older brother Bailey and paternal grandmother whom they called momma. This book won immediate success and was nominated for a national book award.

In the late 1950's she joined the Harlem writer's guild and met James Baldwin and other important writers. It was during that time she got the

opportunity to hear Dr. Martin Luther King speak and that led her to become a part of the civil rights movement.

Angelou was a prolific writer and widely read poet, her poetry was known more for its depictions of black beauty and the strength of women.

She tried to turn everyone's attention to the lives of black community in America, her themes mainly dealt with the painful anguish suffered by blacks. She is the first black woman to have a screenplay produced in 1972 and was awarded Emmy award for her performance in *Roots* in 1977. During the early 1900's she has written several books for children, including *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (1993) and *My Friendly Chicken, and Me* (1994). Her poetry collections include the complete collected poems of Maya Angelou (1994) and "Phenomenal Women" (1995), a collection of four poems that appeared in the magazine named cosmopolitan in 1978. The author has also written occasional poems, including *A Brave startling Truth*(1995), which commemorated the founding of the United Nations, and *Amazing Peace* (2005), a poem written for the white house Christmas tree-lighting ceremony. Her collection of essays include "Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now" (1993) and many more.

Through the work *I know why the caged bird sings* the author tried to discuss the aspects of her personal experience publicly. She was respected as the spokesperson for the black people and women and her works considered to be as the defense, for the black culture. Her works made a deliberate attempt to

challenge the common structure of autobiography by critiquing, changing and expanding the genre. Her books mainly concentrated on the themes of racism, identity, family and travel. In her book, she manages to bring out the women life in the male dominated society. Here the author brings out her early livelihood as a child, the book's central character; symbolic character for every black girl, Angelou describes of the crucial darkness of her life, an eight year old girl who was raped by her mother's lover. Another metaphor is of a bird that struggles to move out from its cage which is the main theme in this book, a central image throughout the work.

As said words are more powerful than sword, here literature and the powerful words helped the young Maya to cope with her bewildering world; books become her refuge as she works through her trauma.

The project here discusses about the main theme of Racism and its perspectives. Here, the project is divided into three chapters, the first chapter discusses about the theme racism and the second chapter analyses the work from the critical perspective and the last chapter explores the elements of racism seen in this work.

Chapter 1

What is Racism?

Racism the most commonly heard word, describing the people's suffering, the oppression they had to face based on the color of their skin they were born in. In other words it can also be described as, the belief that groups of humans possessing different behavioral traits corresponding to physical appearance are divided based on the superiority of one race over the other. It may also mean prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed against other people because of their difference in race or ethnicity. The concepts of race and ethnicity are considered to be separate in contemporary social science. "Ethnicity" is often used in a sense close to the one traditionally attributed to "race": the division of human groups based on qualities assumed to be essential or innate to the group. Therefore, racism and racial discrimination are often used to describe discrimination on an ethnic or cultural basis. Racism, a modern concept arose in the European age of Imperialism the subsequent growth of capitalism. The beginning of Atlantic slave trade paving way for major racial segregation especially in United States in the 19th and 20th centuries and South Africa under apartheid. This racial discrimination held in Western culture was well documented and it was taken as a reference to study on racism.

Racism is often considered the ultimate violent act a person can commit towards another individual of another race. Various researchers have attempted to define this term 'racism' and made variety of definitions. Webster's third new international dictionary defines racism as "the assumption that psycho cultural traits and capacities are determined by biological race and that races differ decisively from one another

which is coupled with a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to dominate over others”. This definition is useful in demonstrating the dynamics of domination involved in racism, but it fails to mention what specific behaviors or actions are considered racist. Some stated “racism means falsely attributing inherited characteristics of personality or behavior to individuals of a particular physical appearance. Furthermore, a racist is someone who believes that biological explanation can be given for characteristics superiority or inferiority supposedly possessed by people of a given physical stock.”

The origin of the word “race” is not clear. Many linguists say that it came to the English language from middle French, but there is no such agreement on how it came to the Latin based languages. Many says the word racism is synonym for racialism which implies racial Supremacy, racial discrimination and thus it gave a new term in the world war II, during the Hitler’s dominancy, which came to be known as Nazism .The word came into widespread usage in the western world in the 20th century describing the social and political ideology of Nazism, which treated “race” as a naturally given political unit.

Within and outside of subtle racism, there are various forms of racism. Namely, scientific racism, symbolic racism and institutional racism are the most common forms discussed in literature. Scientific racism, the act of attempting to identify biologically that the dominant culture possessing superior attributes, continues to exist for both unintentional and intentional reasons. It has existed for years and contributes to be portrayed.

Symbolic racism; which is unintentional and covert, is the most insidious because people are often unaware of the harmful outcomes that result from their behaviors. They are more likely to deny their racist behavior.

Lastly, more pervasive form of racism is “systemic or institutional racism”, defined by Dovidio and Gaertner as ‘the intentional or unintentional manipulation or toleration of institutional policies that unfairly restrict the opportunities of particular groups of people’.

It manifests itself in two ways Institutional racism, racial discrimination derived from those individuals carrying out the dictates of others who are prejudiced or of a prejudiced society. Personal discrimination is a manifestation of institutional racism exhibited by other superiors. Structural racism, inequalities rooted in the system –wide operation of a society that excludes certain numbers of particular groups from significant participation in major social institutions.

Aversive racism is a form of implicit racism, in which a person’s negative evaluations of racial or ethnic minorities are realized by a persistent avoidance of interaction with other racial and ethnic groups. Aversive racism is similar in implications to the concept of symbolic or modern racism, which is also a form of implicit, unconscious or covert attitude which results in unconscious forms of discrimination. This term was coined by Joel Kovel to describe the subtle racial behaviors of any ethnic or racial group who rationalize their aversion to a particular group by appeal to rules or stereotypes. People showing aversive racist behavior are tend to show egalitarian beliefs and they often deny racially motivated behavior, nevertheless

they change their behavior when dealing with a member of another race or ethnic group that the one they belong to.

First of all, educational system has frequently been attacked throughout history for segregation and other discriminatory behaviors. There were books involving ambiguous concept of race. Minority cultures were constantly presented as the “lagging behind”, they were also shown as negatively imaged whereas white cultured were portrayed as neutral or positive.

During the period of 1526 – 1866 about 12 million Africans were taken from their homeland and forcibly shift to the Atlantic, marking the beginning of so called Atlantic slavery. To satisfy the labor needs of the rapidly growing North American colonies, white European settlers turned in the early 17th century from indentured servants, mostly poor Europeans to a cheaper more plentiful source of enslaved Africans. Then there was a rapid spread of slavery in American colonies. After American revolution, by the end of 18th century many northern states abolished slavery , but the institution was absolutely vital to the south, where black people constituted a large minority of the population and economy relied on the production of crops like tobacco and cotton.

Racism came into existence in the United States since the colonial era, and it involves laws, and actions which discriminate against various groups or adversely impact them in other ways, based on their race and ethnicity. The white Americans legally enjoyed their privileges and rights, these same privileges and rights can be denied to the members of other races and minority groups. African Americans faced

restrictions on their political, social, and economic freedoms throughout much of United States history. Native Americans have experienced genocide, forced removals, massacres and discrimination. Racial politics remained a major phenomenon, and racism continues to be reflected in socio economic inequality.

In the 1920s, the great migration of black Americans from the rural south to the urban north sparked an African American cultural renaissance that took its name from the New York City neighborhood of Harlem but became a widespread movement in cities throughout the north and west. Also came to be known as the Black Renaissance or New Negro movement. The Harlem renaissance marked the first time that mainstream publishers and critics turned their attention seriously to African American literature, music, art and politics. It was a phase of larger Negro movement that had emerged in the early 20th century and in some ways ushered in the civil rights movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s. though it was centered in Harlem neighborhood many black writers from African and Caribbean colonies who lived in Paris were also influenced by the movement which spanned from about 1918 until mid-1930s the zenith of this ‘flowering of Negro literature’ as James Weldon preferred to call this Harlem renaissance. The social foundations of this movement included the great migration of African American from rural to urban spaces and from south to north. Uplifting the race and opening socioeconomic opportunities and developing race pride. The Harlem renaissance is considered to have been a rebirth of the African-American arts and culture.

In conclusion, racism is a complex word and behavior. The society of the United States infiltrated with various systemic and covert racist behaviors.

Chapter 2

Critical Analysis of Maya Angelou's Work

In *I know why the caged bird sings*, Maya Angelou describes her early childhood insecurity of being born as a black girl in the American south during the time of 1930s and later in California in the 1940s. Her parents got divorced when she was about three years old and she along with her brother, were shifted to live with their paternal grandmother Annie Henderson, whom they refer as Momma. Momma runs the only store in the black section of Stamps and becomes the central moral figure in Maya's childhood. During their childhood Maya and Bailey, struggled a lot of being ignored, rejected and abandoned by their parents. And Maya always had a strange belief that she is an ugly child who will never be equivalent to those white girls. On Easter Sunday, Maya finds it unable to finish reciting a poem in Church self consciously feeling ridiculed and thinks herself a failure. This makes her cry and wet herself. In her times of growing up she had to face deep seated southern racism. She used to spend most of her time in Momma's store. When she turns eight, the unexpected arrival of father occur, he comes and takes Maya and Bailey to their mom Vivian Baxter in St. Louis, Missouri. Alluring and beautiful Mrs. Baxter lives a wild life working in gambling parlors.

One morning Maya gets sexually assaulted by Mr. Freeman who is her mother's boyfriend. They go to the court and afterward Mr. Freeman is violently murdered by some underground criminal associates of Maya's family. In the aftermath of these events, Maya endures the guilt and shame of having been sexually abused. She feels that she bears the responsibility for Freeman's death because she denied in the court that he molested her prior to the rape. Maya thereafter stops speaking to everyone except

Bailey. Her silence was first considered to be a post rape trauma, but later the family becomes frustrated and angry at her silence as a disrespectful behavior. Both Maya and Bailey then return to Stamps to live with Momma. The introduction of Mrs. Bertha Flowers to Maya by her Momma made Maya to manage easily to come out of her silence. Mrs. Bertha Flowers is a kind, educated woman who tells Maya to read works of literature. She gives her books of poetry that helps her to regain her voice. Maya becomes aware of both the fragility and strength of her community. Maya attends a church revival during which a priest preaches implicitly against white hypocrisy through his sermon on charity. Maya also observes the entire community listening to Joe Louis, a hero of heavyweight championship boxing match, desperately longing for him to defend the title against his white opponent. Maya witnesses several incidents in her life that teaches her the insidious nature of racism. At the age of 10 Maya works a under white woman who calls Maya “Mary” for her own convenience. Maya becomes enraged and retaliates by breaking the white woman’s fine china. During Maya’s eighth grade graduation, a white speaker devastates the proud community by explaining that black students are only meant to become athletes or servants. Later in Maya’s life there occurs another breaking incident , Maya gets a rotten tooth Momma takes her to the only dentist in stamps, who is a white man insults Maya that he will never treat a negro and says he would rather put his hand in dog’s mouth but not in a negro’s . Bailey encounters a dead, rotting black man and witnesses white man’s satisfaction at seeing the body.

At the age of thirteen, Maya moves to live with her mother Vivian in Los Angeles and then in Oakland, California. Big Bailey, in Los Angeles has to put up with

his cruel indifference and hostile girlfriend, Dolores. After Dolores cuts her in fight, Maya moves out of the house and lives with a group of homeless teenagers in a junkyard. At the age of sixteen, she hides her pregnancy news from her mother and step father Clidell. Maya hides it for about eight months and graduates from high school. The first volume ends as Maya begins to feel confident as a mother to be for her new child.

The story begins describing the incidents occurred in the life of young Maya. A young black girl, she faces humiliation in front of everyone at the time of church congregation on Easter. The store being the center of the community and the momma is one of the community's most respected residents. During this time Maya falls in love with reading, especially William Shakespeare, though she feels bit guilty as he was a white man. One afternoon Mr. Steward, the white former sheriff, comes to warn momma that the whites are on the warpath as they say a black man has "messed with" a white woman. Momma decides to hide Willie in the potato and onion bins in case the mob comes to the store looking for a scapegoat to lynch. As a child, Maya constantly hears from others about her ugliness she has kinky hair and dark skin and she looks little bit bigger than her age. Bailey on the other hand is a small, graceful attractive kid. Whenever somebody remarks on Maya's ugly appearance, Bailey outrageously insults the offending party. Bailey, for Maya is the most important person in her world.

Reverend Howard Thomas, the presiding church elder in the district used to visit stamps every three months. He usually stays with Momma on Saturday and delivers a sermon in church on Sunday. Maya and Bailey hate him as he always eats the best parts of Sunday dinner. Momma does not believe it is safe for the blacks to speak to whites

and certainly not with insolence. Not only that she even mentions white as ‘they’ even in their absence and never ever speaks so harshly of the whites. One Christmas, Maya and Bailey’s parents send those gifts. They convinced themselves that their mother was dead; they find it hard to imagine that she could “laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children”; Momma reprimanded them for being ungrateful. But later Maya and Bailey destroys the blond blue eyed china doll their mother had sent. Big Bailey, their father visits Stamps a year later unexpectedly. He speaks just like the whites and also owns a car. He stays in Stamps for three weeks before surprising the children with the news that he will take them to St. Louis to see their mother. Momma seems sad but tells them to behave well. Big Bailey completely remains as a stranger to Maya and she finds it difficult to believe that he is her father. But Bailey easily gone along with big Bailey, they jokes and laugh together.

The first meeting, of children and mother, Vivian’s beauty strikes Maya dumb and Bailey falls in love with her. Maya surmises that the intensity of Bailey’s feelings stems from the fact that he and his mother resemble each other in physical beauty and personality. Having landed in St. Louis during the heyday of prohibition, Bailey and Maya meet all kinds of underground organized crime figures. Vivian’s mother, grandmother Baxter, entertains these men and she has influence with the police. Vivian’s brother has city jobs, positions rarely held by black men and they have a reputation of meanness, beating upon both blacks and the whites. Maya stands in awe of her uncle whom she described as mean though never cruel. They treat the children well and share stories about them as toddlers; even they told how Maya got her nickname. When Bailey was less than three years of old he learned that Maya whose birth name is

Marguerite, was his sister and he began calling her “mya sister” and then “my” which later morphed into “Maya”. Uncle Tommy tells Maya that she is so smart so never be upset thinking about not being pretty. Both Maya and Bailey lived with their maternal grandparents for six months before moving in with the Vivian and her old fat boyfriend, Mr. Freeman who feels insecure with his relationship with Vivian. The shifting didn’t affect Maya as she always felt of belonging to anywhere. She always thought that she and Bailey have been fated to live differently from other children. Maya spends her time in St. Louis by reading fairy tales and telling herself that she does not intend on staying there anyway. Vivian works in a gambling parlor at night. Maya begins sleeping at night with Vivian and Mr. Freeman because she suffers from nightmares. One morning after Vivian had left home, Mr. Freeman sexually assaults Maya. And afterward, he threatens to kill Bailey if Maya ever tells anyone, but Maya who does not understand what has happened and who actually enjoyed being held by someone, cannot understand what caused such a threat. For weeks, Mr. Freeman ignores her and again molests her. Maya feels rejected and hurt, but she loses herself in other things, such as books. She wishes to be a boy because the heroes of her favorite books and stories are all male. Bailey welcomes the move to St. Louis and he makes new friends, with whom he plays baseball. Maya however does not make any friends during this time.

She and Bailey begin to grow apart, so she spends her Saturdays in the library reading fantastic adventures. In late spring after Vivian stays out all night one time, Mr. Freeman sends Maya to buy milk. When she returns from the errand, Mr. Freeman rapes her. He threatens to kill her and she screams and he threatens to kill Bailey if she tells anyone. Afterward Mr. Freeman sends her to the library, but Maya returns home

because of intense physical pain she feels between her legs. Later that night Maya hears Vivian argue with Mr. Freeman. In the morning Vivian tells about Mr. Freeman's leaving. When Bailey tries to change the linens, the bloodied panties Maya has hidden under the mattress fall out. Vivian takes Maya to the hospital. Bailey privately urges Maya to name the rapist, assuring her that he would not allow the culprit to kill him. Maya reveals Mr. Freeman's name, the authorities promptly arrest him.

Maya thinks to herself as a grown woman, remembering that her nurses told her that she has already experienced the worst that life has to offer. Maya feels caught in a trap when the attorney asks her whether there were any sexual incidents with Mr. Freeman prior to the rape. She fears rejection from her family if she admits to the previous incidents but she doesn't want to lie either. But ultimately she lies to the court and Mr. Freeman receives a sentence of one year. He is then temporarily released after hearing. Later a white policeman visits that night to tell Grandmother Baxter that Mr. Freeman has been beaten to death. They quickly change the topic when Maya hears it and they suddenly starts discussing about casual mayors before policeman leaves. The family never speaks about the incident and Maya convinces herself that Mr. Freeman was killed because she lied in order to condemn him. Maya thinks of protecting others by not speaking to anyone except Bailey. At first the family accepts her silence as fallout from the rape but after sometime they feel offended and become angry and violent with her.

Maya and Bailey return to stamps though Maya is not sure whether Momma has sent for them or whether her St. Louis family simply became unable to handle her silence. Bailey misses Vivian, but Maya finds herself relieved to return to the barren

world of Stamps. Bailey exaggerates the beauty of the big city to others in the residents in sarcastic tones but no one notices his insults. Bailey was so kind only to Maya and he understood her silence and she understood his frustration.

Mrs. Bertha flowers whom Maya reveres as the aristocrat of black Stamps plans to make prod her out of her silence and invites her to her house and gives her some books and tells her to read them aloud. After reading aloud and impressing Maya with her abilities, Mrs. Flowers assigns Maya the task of memorizing a poem to recite during her next visit. Maya takes a job in Mrs. Viola Cullinan's home at the age of ten. One day one of Mrs. Cullinan's friends infuriates Maya when she suggests that Mrs. Cullinan call Maya "Mary" because Margaret is too long. Even worse, Maya notes her name is Marguerite, not Margaret. When Mrs. Cullinan begins calling her Mary, Maya becomes furious. She knows momma will not allow her to quit, so she decided she must find a way to get fired. She deliberately slacks in her work, but to no avail. Mrs. Cullinan drops her veneer of genteel racism and insults Maya with a racist slur. Upon hearing Mrs. Cullinan's sobs and screams her friend's crowd into the kitchen and one of them asks if "Mary" is responsible. One evening, Bailey stays out until well after dark. Momma takes Maya along with her to search Bailey. They find Bailey trudging home but he doesn't give any explanation for his lateness.

Maya observes that for days Bailey has no soul. Later Bailey explains to Maya that he was late because he had seen a movie starring a white actress, Kay Francis who looked like Vivian, and he stayed there to watch the movie a second time. Maya laughs at the irony of a beloved white actress looking just like their mother. The annual revival meeting interrupts the harsh daily existence in Stamps. People from all the black

churches attend. This year the preacher delivers a sermon admonishing those who practice false charity. The sermon promises divine revenge and divine justice. People crowded inside the store listen to the heavy weight championship boxing match on the radio, desperately hoping that Joe Louis, a hero for the black community, will defend his title. Maya explains that if Louis were to lose everything racist whites say about blacks would be true. His loss would represent and justify another lynching, another raped black woman, another beaten black boy. When Louis wins the fight everyone in the store celebrates with abandon. Maya says he proves blacks are the most powerful people in the world.

During the annual summer season women show off their baking and men fish in the nearby pond. Music and the sounds of the children playing filled the atmosphere. Maya wanders into a secluded clearing to sit on a tree and stare at the sky. Louise Kendrick's, a pretty girl of the same age, comes upon her. At first shy toward each other, they soon hold hands and spin around while looking at the sky. They become best friends and spend hours trying to learn the complicated "tut" language because it is even more esoteric than pig Latin. While in the seventh grade, Maya receives a note from an eighth grader, Tommy Valadon asking her to be his valentine. Maya at first didn't understand what valentine meant, it was Louis who explains that valentine means love. Maya says aloud, "not ever again". She does not explain what she means to Louise. They tear the note into tiny paper and throw into the wind. The day before Valentine's Day, Maya's teacher calls the children by name and reads aloud the cards sent to them from the eighth grade class. Tommy sends another letter to Maya stating that he saw Maya and her friend tear up his note, but he does not think she meant to hurt his

feelings. He still considers her valentine even if she does not answer his letter. He signs the note with his initials. When Maya decided to throw caution to the wind and flirt with him, Tommy's crush has already begun to wane. Bailey constructs a tent in the yard and begins playing games in which Bailey plays the father, the girl plays the mother and Maya plays the baby sitting outside to stand guard. After six months, Bailey loses his virginity to Joyce, an older girl. He begins stealing things from the store for the girl. After a few months she disappears, and her aunt tells Momma that Joyce had eloped with the railway porter whom she met at the store. Hearing this Bailey becomes heartbroken. Maya never liked Joyce, but she hates her for leaving and hurting Bailey.

One stormy night, George Taylor a fellow townsman, comes to the store and stays the night that is heartbroken over the death of his wife, Florida. Momma tells him to be thankful for the forty years of his life that he had spent with Florida. Although Momma says it was pity that they didn't have any children. Mr. Taylor narrated stories of Florida appearing before him at the night before and told him that she wanted children. Maya who hated the custom of telling ghost stories, but Mr. Taylor's account scares her even more because he insists it is real. Maya remembers that she had gone to Florida's funeral. She did not want to go, but Florida had left her yellow brooch to Maya, and Momma insisted that she attend the services. The experience turned out to be Maya's first confrontation with mortality. At the funeral Florida seemed to her like the short lived mud sculptures so often made by children playing in the summer. Returning from her memory Maya cannot help but Mr. Taylor narrating his experience. The night before, he saw a fat blond, blue eyed baby angel laughing at him. He heard his wife's

moaning voice, and the angel laugh harder. Eventually Mrs. Taylor's voice moaned that she wanted children.

The black families in Stamps considered the eighth grade graduation a great event. When Maya takes her seat in the school auditorium she feels so uneasy. Edward Donleavy, a white man gives speech about the improvements in the local schools. The white school has received new lab requirements for science classes thanks to his efforts. He also states that he has bragged too many important people that several great college athletes graduated from Maya's school. Maya feels that he has blemished the joy of the graduation day but insulting that black children only achieved greatness through sports, not through academics. This was a great humiliation for the eighth grade members. Maya laments the fact that she has no control over her life and wishes that Christopher Columbus never sailed to the new world, after Donleavy leave after his speech. Henry reed's valedictory speech dispels the dismal atmosphere, Henry continues to speak with strength and clarity and afterward he turns his back to the audience and addresses the graduating class sitting on the stage. He leads them "lift every voice and sing" a popular song known as Negro national anthem. The song and the lyrics makes Maya drop her cynical attitude and takes pride in her black community.

Meanwhile, Maya develops an excruciating toothache, as the nearest black dentist practice twenty five miles away, so Momma takes Maya to see Dr. Lincoln a white dentist in town. During the great depression, Momma loaned money to many people including the white doctor. Now she believes that he owes her a favor. But when they arrive at the clinic dr. Lincoln states that he does not treat black patient. Momma reminds him that her generous loan had saved him before, he reminds her that he repaid

the loan and also added that he would rather stick his hand in a dog's mouth than in Maya's black mouth. Momma leaves Maya outside and advances into Dr. Lincoln's office. Maya imagines Momma as a superhero wielding her powers and forbidding Dr. Lincoln ever to work in stamps again. In reality Momma tells Dr. Lincoln that he owes her interest on the loan she previously made to him. He protests, saying that she never asked for interest before, but he pays her the ten dollars, demanding a receipt to seal the deal. Afterward, Momma takes Maya to the black dentist in Texarkana. Talking with Uncle Willie later on, Momma indicates that even though she sinned in making Dr. Lincoln pay interest retroactively, he deserved it.

One day, Bailey returns home from an errand, pale and shaken, he feels so perplexed what black people had done to white people to incite so much hatred. He has just seen a black man's dead rotting body pulled from a pond. The white man grinning at the body ordered Bailey to help load the man into the wagon and then pretended that he was going to lock Bailey and the other black men in with the dead body. Not long afterward, Momma begins planning trip to take Bailey and Maya to live in California with their mother. Momma lives in Los Angeles with Bailey and Maya while Vivian makes living arrangements for her children. Maya and Bailey begin to see Vivian not just as a superhuman beauty but also as a real person with fears and insecurities of her own. Vivian seems concerned with her children's well being and even throws them a special party one night at two thirty in the morning, enchanting Maya with her fun loving and spontaneous nature.

Although trained as a nurse, Vivian supports herself and her children by running poker games. Once Maya recalls Vivian shot one of her partners for verbally insulting

her and afterward they retained mutual admiration for each other. After all, Vivian had warned him that she would shoot before pulling the trigger. Soon after, the U.S enters World War II and Vivian marries daddy Clidell, a successful businessman. The family moves to San Francisco. Maya describes about the changes that occur in San Francisco after World War II in U.S. provincial black migrants, not dissimilar to the people Maya knew in stamps, flow into the city, and working side by side with illiterate whites in the defense industry. The blacks were replaced with the Japanese, who have been unjustly interned by the U.S government. No one ever spoke about the Japanese displacement. Upon her entrance into school, she was promoted automatically a grade and later transferred to a white school where she was one among the three black students. The whites appeared aggressive and better educated. This reminds her of her teacher miss kirwin who never played favorites and never treated Maya differently for being black.

At the age of fourteen, Maya receives a scholarship to the California labor school where she learns drama and dance. Daddy Clidell becomes the only true figure Maya ever knows. She loves his strength and his tenderness. He is dignified he has no inferiority complex about receiving little education. He also lacks the arrogance usually associated with men of great accomplishment. Daddy Clidell introduces Maya to his con-men friends who have learned to swindle bigoted whites. They once conned a racist white man from Tulsa who had a history of cheating blacks into paying \$40,000 for a piece of property that did not exist. Maya cannot regard the con men as criminals because she says the deck has been stacked against them from the start anyway. Big Bailey invites Maya to spend the summer with him and his girlfriend, Dolores. Dolores and Maya exchange letters and anticipate incorrectly each other's physical appearance.

Both Dolores and Maya are shocked when they meet for the first time. Big Bailey has promised to marry Dolores, but he keeps postponing the wedding plans. Much to Maya's surprise, they live in a low class mobile home. Nevertheless, Dolores tries to maintain the home in prim and proper style and Maya's messy nature disturbs Dolores from the beginning. Big Bailey watches the mutual discomfort between Maya and Dolores with amusement. A fluent speaker of Spanish and avid chef both by trade and in the home, big bailey makes frequent trips to Mexico supposedly to buy groceries.

One day big Bailey invites Maya on one of his shopping trips inciting Dolores's jealousy. During the trip, he jokes with guard by offering Maya to him as a wife. He drives past the border towns and stops outside Ensenada. Women, men and children greet him warmly. Big Bailey becomes a different person. He relaxes and stops putting on airs. Maya, who knows a bit of Spanish from school, begins to enjoy her, but when she cannot find her father later in the evening she becomes frightened and sits alone in the car waiting for him. Eventually he staggers out drunk and passes out in the car. Maya drives fifty miles back to the border even though she has never driven a car before, let alone one with a clutch. She has a minor accident at the checkpoint. Big Bailey regains consciousness and settles the matter before driving the rest of the way home. He is neither surprised nor angry about the accident. He does not seem surprised that Maya could drive, and Maya dislikes the fact that he does not appreciate the magnitude of her achievement. They ride home in silence.

After returning home Maya over hears an argument between Dolores and big Bailey. Dolores feels that Maya has come between them. Big Bailey leaves the house in a huff, leaving Dolores sobbing alone. Maya approaches Dolores and tells her that she

never meant to come between them. Maya feels strong and honorable doing her good deed, but Dolores rebuffs Maya's peaceful gesture and insults her, calling her mother, Vivian a whore. Furious, Maya tells Dolores she is going to slap her and then does so. Dolores retaliates and Maya realizes that Dolores has stabbed her with scissors. Bleeding, Maya runs out of the house and locks herself in her father's car. Big Bailey hears Dolores screaming and returns to investigate. He takes Dolores inside the house then drives Maya, who feels empowered by the events, to a friend's house, where a woman bandages Maya's wound. Afterward he drives her to the home of another friend, where she spends the night. Big Bailey visits her at noon the next day and gives her some money, promising to return later that evening. Dreading having to face her father's friends, Maya packs some food and leaves. She cannot return to Vivian as she won't be able to hide her wound. Telling about this will create trouble between big Bailey and Vivian and Maya guiltily remembers Mr. Freeman's death all too clearly.

After leaving big Bailey's friend's house, Maya spends the night in the car in a junkyard. When she wakes, a group of black, Mexican and white homeless teenagers stand outside laughing at her through the windows. Everyone enters a dance contest on Saturday nights and Maya and her partner win second prize during her last weekend. Maya learns to appreciate diversity and tolerance fully that month, something that influences her rest of her life, she notes in retrospect. At the end of the summer, Maya calls Vivian and asks her to pay her airfare to San Francisco. The group accepts the news of her impending departure with detachment, although everyone wishes her well. Maya notes that she has changed much since the start of the summer, but Bailey who also seems to have aged significantly shows indifference toward Maya's tales. Still they

share an interest in dancing and become a sensation at the big band dances in the city auditorium. Meanwhile Maya notes, Bailey and Vivian have become estranged. Unconsciously seeking Vivian's approval Bailey begins wearing flashy clothing and dating a white prostitute, trying to model himself after Vivian's male associates. Vivian seems unaware that her own preferences have influenced his tastes. She demands that he stop dating white prostitute, and he begins disobeying her rules. Eventually, Bailey moves out. He and Vivian quickly reconcile, and she promises to arrange a job for him in the south pacific. Meanwhile, Maya acts as a neutral party but becomes terribly upset when Bailey moves out. Bailey assures her that he has a mature mind and that the time has come for him to leave the nest. Maya decides to take a semester off from school and work. For weeks she persists in trying to get a job as a streetcar conductor despite racist hiring policies. She finally succeeds in becoming the first black person to work on the San Francisco streetcars. When she returns to school, she feels out of the place among her classmates. American black women she says must not only face the common problems associated with adolescence, but also racism and sexism. Therefore, it does not surprise her that black women who survive these conflicts possess strong characters.

Maya begins to fear that she is turning into one because she confuses lesbianism with being a hermaphrodite. She notes that she has a deep voice, underdeveloped breasts and hips. She resolves to ask Vivian about a strange growth on her vagina; Vivian explains that changes are perfectly normal. Vivian's answer relieves Maya but she still unanswered fears about whether she might be a lesbian. Maya decides to get a boyfriend to settle the matter once and for all. However all of her male acquaintances busily chase light skinned, straight haired girls. Maya casually and frankly propositions

one of two handsome brothers who live near her, but their unromantic, unsatisfying encounter does not relieve her anxieties about being an abnormal girl. Three weeks later she discovers that she is pregnant. Maya accepts full responsibility for her pregnancy. She writes to Bailey for advice and he tells to keep it a secret. Vivian opposes abortions and he fears sage would make Maya quit school. Maya throws herself into school and confesses after graduating that she is eight months pregnant. Vivian and daddy Clidell calmly accept Maya's impending unwed motherhood without condemnation.

Maya gives birth to a son. She is fascinated by the baby and afraid to touch him. Vivian finally makes Maya sleep with her three week old son. Fearing that she will crush him, Maya attempts unsuccessfully to stay awake all night. Vivian makes her later to show how the baby lies resting comfortably in the crook of her arm. Vivian tells Maya that she does not have to worry about doing the right thing because if her heart is in the right place, she will do the right thing regardless. Maya peacefully returns to sleep next to her little baby. The autobiography ends with an overwhelming image of Vivian. Vivian makes mistakes along the way but she nevertheless survives with strength and honesty. When Maya becomes pregnant Vivian supports and encourages her without any condemnation and also gives her first and most important teachings about trusting her maternal instincts. Maya admires her unflinching honesty, her strength and her caring nature.

Chapter 3

Representation of the Theme Racism

In the autobiography *I know why the caged bird sings* Maya Angelou explores various themes that reflect her real life situation. One of the most highlighted themes is racism. Maya was born in a highly racist society that was largely divided between whites and blacks. The work *I know why the caged bird sings* presents a vivid autobiography of her life experiences. In fact, the title is a metaphor describing her desire to escape from confines, just like a bird struggles to escape from its cage.

In *I know why the caged bird sings* Angelou approaches racism as observed through different angles such as segregation, displacement and resistance.

At a very young age, Maya has to confront various situations that perpetuated racism and segregation. For instance, she believed that blond hair was beautiful. In her visions, she deceptively thought that she was a fat black girl who was trapped in a nightmare. In her childhood, she never came across a white person and did not believe that white people existed. As she got older, Maya witnessed more overt and highly personal incidences of racism. For instance, during her eighth-grade graduation, a white speaker delivered a condescending and racist speech. In her first job, her white boss insisted on calling her Mary since Maya was not a popular name among white Americans. However, the most outrageous event occurred when a dentist refused to treat her merely because she was black. The African American athletes' triumph in the Joe Louis World Championship boxing match revealed the black community's desperate hope for vindication. Clearly, there were very few celebrated African

American heroes. These harsh realities confined Maya's world, and she had to strive so as to surmount them.

Maya is shuttled around to seven different homes between the ages of three and sixteen: from California to Stamps to St. Louis to Stamps to Los Angeles to Oakland to San Francisco to Los Angeles to San Francisco. As expressed in the poem she tries to recite on Easter, the statement "I didn't come to stay" becomes her shield against the cold reality of her rootlessness. Besieged by the "tripartite crossfire" of racism, sexism, and power, young Maya is belittled and degraded at every turn, making her unable to put down her shield and feel comfortable staying in one place. When she is thirteen and moves to San Francisco with her mother, Bailey, and Daddy Clidell, she feels that she belongs somewhere for the first time. Maya identifies with the city as a town full of displaced people. Maya's personal displacement echoes the larger societal forces that displaced blacks all across the country. She realizes that thousands of other terrified black children made the same journey as she and Bailey, traveling on their own to newly affluent parents in northern cities, or back to southern towns when the North failed to supply the economic prosperity it had promised. African Americans descended from slaves who were displaced from their homes and homelands in Africa, and following the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, blacks continued to struggle to find their place in a country still hostile to their heritage.

Black peoples' resistance to racism takes many forms in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Momma maintains her dignity by seeing things realistically and keeping to herself. Big Bailey buys flashy clothes and drives a fancy car to proclaim his worth and

runs around with women to assert his masculinity in the face of dehumanizing and emasculating racism. Daddy Clidell's friends learn to use white peoples' prejudice against them in elaborate and lucrative cons. Vivian's family cultivates toughness and establishes connections to underground forces that deter any harassment. Maya first experiments with resistance when she breaks her white employer's heirloom china. Her bravest act of defiance happens when she becomes the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Blacks also used the church as a venue of subversive resistance. At the revival, the preacher gives a thinly veiled sermon criticizing whites' charity, and the community revels in the idea of white people burning in hell for their actions. "*If growing up is painful for the southern black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult.*" (6)

This vivid assertion ends the opening section of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Although this section, which acts as a prologue, mostly emphasizes the point of view of Maya at five or six years old, this statement clearly comes from Angelou's adult voice. Looking back on her childhood experiences, Maya notes that she not only fell victim to a hostile, racist, and sexist society, but to other social forces as well, including the displacement she felt from her family and her peers. Maya feels displaced primarily because when she was three years old, her parents sent her away to live with her grandmother. This early separation, as well as subsequent ones, leaves her feeling rootless for most of her childhood. Angelou's autobiography likens the experience of growing up as a black girl in the segregated American South to having a razor at one's throat. Her constant awareness of her own displacement was the fact that she differed from other children in appearance and that she did not have a sense of belonging

associated with anyone or anyplace which becomes the “unnecessary insult” that she must deal with at such a young age. Over the course of the work, Maya details numerous negative effects of such displacement, including her susceptibility to Mr. Freeman’s sexual molestation. *“Annie, tell Willie be better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys’ be coming over here later.”* (19)

The former sheriff tells Momma to hide Willie from members of the Ku Klux Klan who are angered that a black man had some unspecified contact with a white woman. This warning, and the language used in it, shows the violent racism that hangs over the town of Stamps. As a “cripple,” Willie would easily have been recognized, so clearly he must have had no involvement in the incident. This leads us to believe the Klan members simply look to punish any black man for the supposed actions of another of their race. Further, the community of Stamps accepts the Klan’s lawless control, even softening the image of these brutal, hate-filled men by referring to them as “boys”. *“In stamps the segregation was so complete that most black children didn’t really, absolutely know what whites looked like”.*(27)

Maya describes the town where she grew up as wholly segregated. Black and white sections divide the town, which features separate schools and sections in the movie theater. The only white people Maya and her neighbors see with any regularity are the “powhitetrash” who live on Momma’s land and shop at her store. Because the two races rarely come together, no familiarity or acceptance develops between the races. Blacks and whites do not see one another as individuals and people but as aliens.

“The black woman in the south who raises, grandsons and nephews has her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose. Any break from routine may herald for them unbearable news.”(34)

On a night Bailey returns late from the movies, Momma begins to worry that harm has befallen him. Here, Maya emphasizes that the story of black women has too often been told against the backdrop of violence perpetrated against the men. Black males may be beaten or lynched based on an unfounded accusation, a suspicion of wrongdoing, or simply their skin color, as evidenced when the Klan went on the prowl for a black victim earlier in the book. Black families endured such anxiety and fear on a regular basis, never knowing when whites might bring them to tragedy.

“A light shade had been pulled down between the black community and all things white, but one could see through it enough to develop fear admiration contempt for the white “things” white folk’s cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women. But above all, their wealth that allowed them to waste was the most enviable.”
(53)

In this passage, Angelou captures Maya’s childlike observations about what makes white people different. Her fixation on clothing as a sign of difference also refers back to the incident in church when she suddenly realizes that her fairy-tale taffeta dress is really an old, faded white woman’s hand-me-down. Stamps, Arkansas, suffers so thoroughly from segregation and Maya’s world is so completely enmeshed in the black community that she often finds it hard to imagine what white people look like. They appear to her more like spectral ghosts with mysterious powers—and wonderful

possessions—than as fellow human beings. At the same time, from a young age Maya knows that white people bear responsibility for the suffering of the cotton-pickers. She also learns from Momma that it is best not to address any white people directly, as it might lead to mortal danger. Momma goes so far as never to even speak about white people without using the title “they.”

“My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped...this might be the end of the world. If Joe lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than the apes.”(146)

In this scene, Maya crowds around the Store’s radio with the rest of the community to listen to Joe Louis defend his world heavyweight boxing title. As Maya conveys in this passage, the entire black community has its hopes and psychological salvation bound up in the fists of Louis, “the Brown Bomber.” This passage describes the precarious nature of black pride in the face of hostile oppression, highlighting the staggering and wrenching significance this boxing match held for the community as the community teeters between salvation and despair. The rarity of black people achieving public acclaim in both the black and white communities meant that the few who managed to do so had to bear the expectations of the black community. The match becomes an explicit staging of black against white. Louis’s loss would mean the “fall” of the race and a return to the idea that whites had a right to denigrate black people. Cynics might say that Louis’s win does little more than stave off the black community’s psychological despair. It does not turn the tables on whites because there is no denying

that whites still hold all the power. His public victory, however, proves to blacks in the Store that they are the most powerful people in the world and enables them to live another day with strength and vigor in the face of oppression. Racism plays many psychological games with blacks and whites, and perhaps Louis's public recognition helps to teach both whites and blacks to accept African-Americans as equals.

"It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of blackness...Annie, you know I don't treat negro, colored people...Annie, my policy is I would rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's."(202)

Maya explains the humiliation she has to face because of the race she is born to. The dentist Lincoln denies treatment and insults them that he would rather put his hand in a dog's mouth but neither in a nigger's.

"Bailey was talking so fast he forgot to stutter, he forgot to scratch his head and clean his fingernails with his teeth. He was away in a mystery, locked in the enigma that young southern black boys start to unravel from seven years old to death. The humorless puzzle of inequality and hate." (212)

Bailey reels from having encountered a dead, rotting black man and having witnessed a white man's lighthearted satisfaction at seeing the body. Maya emphasizes that the traumatic experience forces him to *try* to confront a degree of hatred that he cannot comprehend. Maya does not say that he succeeds in comprehending the reasoning behind white hatred. Bailey asks Uncle Willie to explain how colored people had offended whites originally, but both Uncle Willie and Momma try to hide the

sickening, debilitating truth from Bailey. This section draws attention to the idea that Bailey's life depended upon him not understanding or attempting to understand how racism operates against black men. Bailey's experience here precipitates Momma's decision to remove the children from both the physical and psychological dangers associated with growing up in the South. This quote also illustrates the fact that while Angelou writes mostly about the experiences of black girls and women living in the segregated South, she also empathizes with the experiences of her male relatives.

“The black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence.”(291,292)

This passage addresses why black women have strength of character. Maya says that most of the strong black women in her novel are “survivors.” They have strong characters quite simply because they have survived against impossible odds. Therefore, they obviously show heroism, courage, and strength. Moreover, Maya states that the odds pitted against black women include not only the triple threat of sexism, racism, and black powerlessness, but also the simultaneous presence of “common forces of nature” that assault and confuse all children. Maya has had to grow up more quickly than the children around her. Her experiences—driving the car in Mexico, living in the junkyard, returning to witness Bailey move out of the house, and then successfully fighting to get

a job as the first black conductor on the San Francisco streetcars, rather than go back to a school where she would not belong—have made her feel displaced and older than her years. Maya is already on her way toward becoming “a formidable character” as a result of the many assaults she deals with in “her tender years,” but this does not mean that Maya is an adult. Maya’s discussion of the “common forces of nature” foreshadows how her journey of survival has yet to meet the obstacles of adolescence, sexuality, and teenage pregnancy. These obstacles face all children, but for black females, they exacerbate an already difficult situation.

Conclusion

In *I know why the caged bird sings*, Maya Angelou explores various themes that reflect her real life situation. One of the most outstanding themes is racism. Maya was born and bred in a highly racist society that was largely divided between whites and blacks. This shaped her early life and young adulthood. *I know why the caged bird sings*, presents a vivid autobiography of her experiences. In fact, the title is a metaphor describing her desire to escape from her confines, just like a bird struggles to escape from its cage. In addition, by comparing her situation to a singing yet caged bird, she alludes to her positive and determined personality.

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 Injustice of Racism in Maya Angelou's Autobiographical Work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a work which is 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.

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.

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