

The Defining Impact of Books in Maya Angelou's

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

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Initially autobiographies started out as a means to express oneself, but the growing scholarly interest between what constitutes truth and fiction, along with an avid interest in personal life has brought new prominence to the genre of autobiography. Every autobiographical work tends to be a cry for the expression of identity and every autobiographical study yearns to understand the evolution of the individual. Ethically, reason dictates that every autobiographical work is obliged to speak the truth, but many a time the thin line between fact and fiction gets blurred. This intentional and delicate blurring of lines is unavoidable due to the situations or events that feature in an autobiographical work, where moral issues of privacy come into play. As a generally regarded rule, writers are expected to stay true to the cultural, political, economic, religious and the historical scenarios of their time. Writing an autobiography also tends to be highly cathartic to the author, it gives him/her a chance to redefine the 'self' critically and arrive at a place of acceptance.

The eminent poet, naturalist and author Henry David Thoreau wrote, "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live!" (91). This sentence rings true when considering the autobiography of Maya Angelou who has influenced and enlightened the lives of millions of people by her courage, dignity, integrity and unflinching support for a worthy cause. Maya Angelou's extraordinary life documented in her own provocative prose is a literary treasure trove that continues to inspire and teach the world at large lessons in humility and humanity. Angelou's seven volume autobiography is almost like an anthem to the Afro American race, she has skilfully and wonderfully captured the plight and pangs of her people while maintaining an underlying ray of hope that refuses to fade out. This glimmer of hope weaving through the book and her eloquent prose has rendered a timeless appeal to her works. This paper largely focuses on her debut autobiographical novel that spans her formative years from an infant to a budding mom at seventeen.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) is the famous autobiographical work of the early years of Maya Angelou an Afro-American poet, author, and activist. *I Know Why the Caged Bird*

Sings was originally published in hardcover in the United States by Random House, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, in 1969. Maya dedicates this book to her son Guy Johnson, whose appearance in the last chapter marks her eventful journey from a confused and floundering little girl to a confident and remarkable young woman. Maya also poetically dedicates her book to the quiet and unassuming black folks, who (like Maya) continue to 'defy the odds and gods and sing their songs'.

Maya Angelou is highly respected as a spokesperson for African Americans and regarded as one of the great voices of contemporary literature. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* forms the first part of her seven volume autobiographical series that explores subjects such as identity, racism, family and literacy. The title taken from a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar depicts little Maya's frame of mind, she longs to free herself from the shackles imposed on her by an unjust society. Maya's plight as a little black girl is similar to the captivity of a caged bird, but a ray of hope courses through the book, courtesy of the author, whose indomitable spirit refuses to stop singing and writing:

A literary reputation which is almost wholly based on autobiographical writing is a rare thing, but Maya Angelou's achievement in constructing an individual Black woman's life as a significant life and liberating autobiography itself from its subordinate status in the hierarchy of literary discourses, proves that it is possible (Lauret 118).

The sheer beauty and vitality of her words and lyrics has rendered a certain degree of elegance to her prose and poetry that is widely read and taught in educational institutions.

Maya Angelou born in 1928 had to face the typical problems that affected the Afro American community due to prejudice and racism, which was rampant in the southern states till the mid twentieth century. If belonging to the coloured race was considered inferior, then being a coloured girl in the 1930's was even terrible. Maya evocatively writes, "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" (4). Identity and self-respect were issues the Afro Americans struggled with, and being born as an Afro American girl pulled you further down on the social scale. Amidst such harsh and destructive circumstances Maya struggled and grew up to be one of the most respected and accomplished persons of her time. She overcame racial animosity and childhood trauma through the form of the written word; books gave her the escape she needed to come out of her trauma induced shell.

Maya states that she “met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love” (13). Maya Angelou started reading at an impossibly young age. A little girl falling in love with Shakespeare is quite unheard of, but Maya Angelou who grew up during the Jim Crow era says that there wasn’t much to do in her small town, so she read all the books she could lay her hands on, and that’s how she met and fell in love with the great bard when she was only four years old! She thought Shakespeare must have been a black girl, because the sonnet that touched her heart, perfectly encapsulated what she felt as a little black girl in a racially discriminative environment. “The author of Sonnet 29 must have been a black girl because its solemn words expressed so fiercely what she—an outcast, the victim of racism, destitution, and childhood sexual abuse, crying out alone before a deaf heaven—felt inside” (Prior). Maya also enjoyed reading Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray and Henley, but it was Shakespeare that said

When in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes,
 I all alone beweeep my outcast state,
 And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
 And look upon myself and curse my fate, (439)

seemed to depict her state of being. Maya also says that she saved her young and loyal passion for prominent African American novelists, poets, civil rights activists like Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois’. These black authors and activists instilled in young Maya a sense of pride and dignity in her race, and showed her that being black was not a major crime like the world around her seemed to think.

Young Maya probably felt safer when she inhabited the world of her imagination through books. Furthermore, being displaced left an indelible mark on Maya, who was shipped off to live with her paternal grandma in Stamps, Arkansas, and books seemed to offer some semblance of stability. Books also helped her to deal with the social evil of segregation; it was like living a different and better life, where racial discrimination wasn’t a deciding factor of your worth as a human being. Reading was more than a hobby for Maya, it was her lifeline in a pernicious world. Maya read to escape her external world brimming with fear, hatred and insecurities. Reading enabled her to inhabit a safer world that didn’t discriminate and enslave her to a warped ideology. In fact, the title of her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is taken from Paul Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy”,

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore
 ...

But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings -

I know why the caged bird sings! (qtd. in Wiggins 207)

It is easy to see why these verses by Dunbar should strike a chord with Maya. The predicament of the caged bird is indicative of the little black girl who felt trapped and isolated by the restrictions placed on her by an aggressively racist society. Yet the spirit of the little black girl like that of the caged bird cannot be tamed and these figuratively and literally caged creatures continue to sing their song and live in hope, and that has made all the difference. Speaking about a few of her favourite authors, Maya Angelou explains why Paul Laurence Dunbar fired her imagination

When you are put down by the larger society and there's a poet who compares the color of your skin to chocolate and brown sugar, you fall for it, because you need it. Paul Laurence Dunbar — who was one of the great poets of the 19th and 20th centuries — wrote about African-Americans, and he showed me the beauty of our colors and the wonder of our music. (Maya Angelou's 6 favorite books)

The incident at the dentist' office is indicative of the redeeming power of books in little Maya's life. When Maya and Momma faced acute humiliation at the hands of a white dentist, Maya's fecund imagination cooks up a wild and implausible story as a defence mechanism against emotional and physical suffering. Emphatically stating her pain, Maya writes, "It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness" (187). When Dentist Lincoln refused to treat little Maya because he'd rather stick his "hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (189), Momma sent Maya away to deal with the Dentist privately. And this is where Maya's imagination cooks up a hilarious and comical encounter that seems to lessen the severity of the racial attack:

Momma ... caught him by the collar of his white jacket. ... With just an edge of her disgust showing, Momma slung him back in his dentist's chair. "Sorry is as sorry does, and you're about the sorriest dentist I ever laid my eyes on." ... Momma pulled herself back from being ten feet tall with eight-foot arms ... (190)

Maya's obsession with reading seemed to soften the blows life throws her way. This quote by Meredith Wood, "Reading stimulates the imagination and a good imagination can change the world in the most splendid of ways" (qtd. in Goodreads), is the secret by which Maya survives the harsh realities of racial segregation. Maya inherited another world when she was young, because the real world that she was born in wasn't conducive to the evolution of herself. The real world placed her on the outskirts of society due to the colour of her skin, but through her imagined

worlds she ended up changing her real world. Rainer Maria Rilke expounds upon this very aspect of reading in his Letters to a Young Poet:

A world will come over you, the happiness, the abundance, the incomprehensible immensity of a world. Live a while in these books, learn from them what seems to you worth learning, but above all love them. This love will be repaid you a thousand and a thousand times, and however your life may turn, — it will, I am certain of it, run through the fabric of your growth as one of the most important threads among all the threads of your experiences, disappointments and joys (19).

There is a particular episode in Maya Angelou's life that perfectly describes how something negative, or painful can be turned around to induce positive emotions that embolden and strengthen the little black girl on her journey in life. While referring to her rape and her self-inflicted silence for five years as a result of that trauma, Maya says:

To show you ... how out of evil there can come good, in those five years I read every book in the black school library. I read all the books I could get from the white school library. I memorized James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. I memorized Shakespeare, whole plays, fifty sonnets. I memorized Edgar Allen Poe, all the poetry — never having heard it, I memorized it. I had Longfellow, I had Guy de Maupassant, I had Balzac, Rudyard Kipling...

Out of this evil, which was a dire kind of evil, because rape on the body of a young person more often than not introduces cynicism ... In my case I was saved in that muteness... And I was able to draw from human thought, human disappointments and triumphs, enough to triumph myself (qtd. in Popova).

This the power of positive emotions over negative debilitating ones, the ability to convert something this evil into a huge stepping stone is no easy task, but with hope and the attitude of looking towards the present with a positive frame of mind enabled little Maya to hone her literary skills at such a nascent age.

After the man who raped Maya is “kicked to death” (86) Maya begins to wonder whether it is because of what she said that led to his death. She starts to worry and believe that if she “talked to anyone else that person might die too. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die ... ” (87). Maya clamped up after this trauma, she hardly spoke to anyone except her brother, Bailey. Maya's silence was a result of her naivety and she came out of her self-imposed affliction with the help of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, who awakened in

her a deeper understanding and love for the written word. Words according to Mrs. Flowers, “mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning” (98).

This was a defining moment in young Maya’s life; the sheer poetic elegance in Mrs. Flowers voice captivated her and when Mrs. Flowers gave her a book of poems to memorize, Maya was filled with joy that she was liked for just being herself. This gave her the impetus to grow out of her fears and resume her old nature. A few years down the line when Maya has to move to California to be with her father, she muses about missing Bailey but about Mrs. Flowers she writes, “I wouldn’t miss Mrs. Flowers, for she had given me her secret word which called forth a djinn who was to serve me all my life: books” (200). Books formed a driving force in Maya and Bailey’s lives, “because in Stamps there wasn’t anything else to do” (63).

Literature was an important survival tool for young Maya, who found solace and comfort in the words that seemed to echo the depths of her soul. According to McPherson, “If there is one stable element in Angelou’s youth it is [a] dependence upon books” (qtd. in Wikipedia). Maya’s yearning for books and her devouring of them is an unconscious act to accumulate more learning, to gain freedom from oppression. Literacy is a form of freedom, in many ways it is the most virulent form of freedom; to be able to open one’s mind to new possibilities and ideas, to know that what society dictates is not always the truth. It liberated Maya from the shackles of ideology the world placed on her, she was no longer the caged bird. She was the bird that soared high on the words scrawled across many books that ignited her imagination and freed her soul from being bogged down by oppression and suppression.

A key element of Black women’s liberation is the acquisition of literacy. The twin issues of education and literacy have always been prominent in Black American writing. Slaves were strictly forbidden access to education, because whites saw education as potentially empowering; ... To be able to write of one’s life, to set down experience in words and thereby achieve a degree of intellectual distance from lived events, this enables oppressed Blacks to begin the attempt to see their lives as determined by political and economic motives that are impersonal. So the reasons for suffering are identified not as personal inadequacy and worthlessness but political decisions that are made independently of the individuals who suffer as a consequence. This liberation from guilt is itself empowering; patriarchal society depends upon the internalization of its values by its victims. The refusal to be made subordinate, to be belittled and demeaned, marks the beginning of resistance to patriarchal values. (Madsen 228)

Only by reading does awareness enter, and awareness leads to awakening of one's conscience. Harper Lee in her most famous book says, "The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience" (150). Due to popular notions of beauty, Maya longed to be different at the beginning of the novel. She dreamed about one day waking up from her "black ugly dream" and her real hair "which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass ..." (2). She even longed for light-blue eyes that black girls like her were led to believe was the epitome of beauty.

This brings into perspective the damaging effects of social standards of beauty on the self-confidence and self-worth of little girls everywhere. This trend hasn't changed much in the current world; fairness is still looked upon as a desirable trait. As the novel progresses, Maya comes to realize her own worth through the power of love. The love of the people around her and Maya's inextinguishable love for books, have wrought changes to her childhood notions of beauty. Maya began to accept herself, she writes, "My hair pleased me too. Gradually the black mass had lengthened and thickened, so that it kept at least to its braided pattern" (173). Learning to discern and be aware of things led to Maya's transformation into a confident and remarkable young woman who was proud to be a "member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race" (184). Maya acknowledges the role of poetry in overcoming the trappings of white supremacy. She speaks about how the "Black known and unknown poets" (184) have bolstered the spirits of her people and have encouraged them to continue singing and rising from the stigma of segregation.

Maya was brought up with strict Christian values; religion formed a defining force in her life. Her grandmother was a staunch black woman who firmly believed that salvation and glory would come to those who wait patiently and trust in the Lord. The Bible was read fervently and passages were memorized. When Maya's father came down to Stamps to take the children away with him, Maya wasn't too happy with this plan. She wasn't keen on going to California, so "she recited a few Bible verses" (56) and left everything to God. During the incident with the "powhitetrash kids" (30), Momma maintained her calmness and dignity by humming gospel songs. Sometimes Momma seemed a little extreme in her faith when she followed the bible to its very word. Little Maya casually happened to use the phrase 'by the way' while talking to her brother and she was caught up short when Momma started whipping her. Maya and Bailey were really confused until Momma explained that

"Jesus was the Way, the Truth and the Light," and anyone who says "by the way" is really saying, "by Jesus", or "by God" and the Lord's name would not be taken in vain her house (103).

Knowing Momma Henderson, the bible was probably one of the first books the children were taught to read, respect and commit to memory. The Holy Bible played a significant role in every aspect of young Maya's life. When the author Maya reminisces about her past, she remembers how little Maya effortlessly weaves biblical references into most incidents of her life. When the used-to-be sheriff came riding into their front yard to warn Uncle Willie to lay low, young Maya was overcome with a sense of fear, humiliation and foreboding hinged to the Klan's coming. She remarked that if she were summoned on Judgment Day by St. Peter to give testimony to the kindness of this used-to-be sheriff, Maya wouldn't be able to say anything on his behalf. Such was Maya's thought process, so thoroughly ingrained with biblical references, it was almost a cultural aspect of being brought up in a black community centred around a thriving church where faith forms the backbone of existence. The deep-rooted faith evident in most black communities was a beacon of hope and light in times of trials and tribulations, and Momma's unwavering faith rubbed off on Maya, who accedes that her faith was a result of her childhood spent under Momma's watchful eye. Referring to one of her favourite books, the Bible, Maya says, "I love the melodies in the Old Testament, how preachers highlight them when they read from the Scripture. But I was influenced forever by the New Testament. I love the Beatitudes, informing us that the meek shall inherit the earth" (Maya Angelou's 6 favorite books).

Maya Angelou longed to find a place where she could be herself. Being displaced very early in life, seems to have created a sense of longing in Maya for 'home'. Her very eventful life has in a way been a long journey to find this elusive home. Maya's autobiographical books runs into seven volumes, and through it all she has changed numerous careers, spouses and she has resided in many cities and countries. Yet she writes in her fifth volume, "The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned" (All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes 246). The adult Maya yearns for a home where she can be herself and not feel vulnerable. This poignantly reflects what Maya has been craving since childhood, the safe world that was denied to her when she was little. Little did Maya know that she would become this very safe place she seeks; the little girl would grow up to become one of the most renowned authors of her era. She would create her home by finding her true self, through words, through actions and sometimes through the silences too that punctuated her soul. Maya became her own safe haven by evolving into the confident and charismatic woman who strode through life leaving her imprint on the hearts and minds of people she touched. All that she was seeking she found in herself, "I long, as does every human being to be at home wherever I find myself" (qtd. in Conrad, 252), and reading her engaging life story, one can safely say that she has indeed reached home.

Maya's evolution throughout the book is heart-warming and poignant; it takes the reader on an emotionally exhilarating journey. Looking back on her childhood, the adult Maya intersperses her book with grown up wisdom and subtle humour to blunt the double-edged sword of racism. Being a prolific reader has turned Maya into an extraordinary writer with flair; a certain rhythm seems to flow from her words. She weaves them into such fine prose, one is tempted to go over them again and again, in the hope of imprinting them to memory. Such is her mastery over words and her autobiographical novels have occupied a lofty height in the genre of Autobiography. Knowing the immense power of books in her life, Maya Angelou writes with a raw sense of candour, in the hope that her experiences may empower readers to find their own selves, "if by my revelations I can encourage anybody first to avoid some of the things I experienced; and if they haven't avoided them, if I can encourage them to forgive themselves, it's all worth it (McPherson 57).

From a girl who was raped at eight and became mute as a consequence, to giving birth when she was sixteen, to having her fair share of lovers and failed marriages; from being a cook, a nightclub dancer, an actress, a prostitute, a journalist, a singer, and donning a host of other roles throughout her eventful life, Maya Angelou has really done it all and she still continues to empower women through her daring life story. She was unapologetically truthful and this quality enabled readers to set themselves free from the shackles imposed on them by society.

Besides her many literary and dramatic accomplishments, Maya Angelou speaks six languages and has been honored by the academic world, receiving the Yale University Fellowship in 1970. Although Angelou has not earned a college degree, she has been granted Honorary Doctorates from Smith College and Mills College and now holds more than fifty other honorary degrees. She is often referred to as Dr. Maya Angelou. ... She has served on several commissions and is a highly sought-after lecturer. ... Maya Angelou has received great acclaim for her narrative skills because she blends honesty with dignity. For future generations, her literary contributions will remain an eloquent reminder that "we are more alike... than we are unlike". (*African American Autobiographers* 17)

And all this has been possible because the little girl Maya loved to read; due to her circumstances she wasn't able to earn a college degree but her imaginative mind and her love for knowledge propelled her to literary heights. Albert Einstein explains this better when he says that, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited whereas imagination embraces the entire world" (97).

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