I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings As An Autobiography Of Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou's debut novel I know why the caged bird sings is a 1969 autobiography describing the early years of American writer and poet Maya Angelou. The first in a seven-volume series, 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 older brother are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother and ends when Maya becomes a mother at the age of 16. In the course of Caged Bird, Maya transforms from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice.

As the story begins, Maya recalls an Easter day in Arkansas. Her grandmother makes her a dress and Maya thinks the dress will make her look like the blond-haired blue-eyed movie star that she wishes, deep down to be. But, the dress turns out to be drab and ugly, as Maya laments that she is black and unattractive as well. The introduction of the novel shows the theme of race and appearance in the very beginning. Maya already establishes that she wanted to be a movie-star-looking white girl as a child, and tried to deny her real appearance. Connected with the idea of race is beauty, as Maya describes images of blond hair and blue eyes as the paragon of beauty, and says her appearance is merely a 'black ugly dream' that she will wake out of.

KaaVonia Hinton (2004, 3) suggests, an important contribution to the literature that challenges the reading of black feminists writings:

A black feminist reading requires a careful look at marginalized groups, as critics analyze depictions of marginalized people who

1. Redefine, revise, reverse, and resist stereotypes, beauty standards, notions of motherhood, womanhood, education, and epistemology;
2. Exercise subjectivity and voice by telling their own stories;
3. Recognize the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, as marginalized people are often multiply oppressed;
4. Find strength in community, sisterhood, and brotherhood through an understanding of the importance of relationships; and
5. Advocate social action and political intent in an effort to improve social conditions

The first character worth examining throughout the novel is Maya's grandmother; Momma. Claudi a Maria Fernandes Correa (2011, 81) represents her in a powerful manner and says that the only African-American woman who owned a store in Stamps was Maya's grandmother. A huge, black woman, who relied on God's words and lived her life by the Bible, Momma is an important figure in Maya's life due to her religious strength and obedience. In a sense, she is a metaphor for ancestrality carried from the past to the present via the words of Momma and her teachings. She told Maya about the harshness of slavery and how the Africans were taken from their land to the United States, but she still encouraged Maya to believe that freedom would come one day. She updates the Bible passages to their reality. Momma said that as freedom

had come to Moses and the Jewish people, so black people's day of freedom would come. It was only a matter of time:

Momma added that some people said that white folks had come over to Africa (she made it sound like a hidden valley on the moon) and stole the colored people and made them slaves, but nobody really believed it was true…. Didn't Moses lead the children of Israel out of the bloody hands of Pharaoh and into the Promised Land? Didn't the Lord protect the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace and didn't my Lord deliver Daniel? We only had to wait on the Lord. (Angelou, 196)

Hope is present in every word that comes from Momma. Hope, believe, and the Lord will come to you if you act right. Because of her courage, Momma had become a heroine for Maya. In many ways, Momma was a groundbreaker: she was the only black who owned a store; she brought up her children as a single mother; she was the only black who people addressed as 'Mrs.' She had enough money to lend to a dentist in Texarkana and she was brave enough to charge it back when needed. When Momma was humiliated by a white dentist who refused to treat little Maya, saying 'I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a niggers' (189), Momma reacted passively, and then Maya fictionalized a 'supermomma' with supernatural powers who would make the dentist shake in fear and change the dentist's nurse into a sack of chicken feed just by waving her handkerchief. This episode made her imagine her grandmother transformed from a mere African- American southern woman to the status of 'wonder woman,' thus eliminating all negative characteristics and giving her the superiority that was necessary for her, in Maya's opinion, especially when pertaining to language. The Black vernacular that Momma used changes to sophisticated, correct and eloquent English.

Maya's feelings in relation to her grandmother are ambivalent: she does respect her; she also thinks she is beautiful and God-fearing, but she cannot understand why she does not talk back to whites. When three 'powhitetrash' girls humiliate her grandmother, humbly she sings a hymn and acts as if nothing important had really happened, and Maya knew that 'Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won' (33). This situation places Momma in a position of superiority in relation to the whites. The old saying 'an eye for an eye' does not apply to this woman because to forgive and forget are more important.

Even though Maya thinks that her grandmother is weak at times, we can observe that what Momma does is to create survival strategies.

The confrontation was by no means something that she could afford to do since this would mean risking her life as well as her family's. Wisdom is an artifice she relies on to live in the segregated city. In a sense and in her terms, Momma beat the whites and gained the respect she deserved.

After moving to Saint Louis to live with her mother and her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, Maya, at the age of eight, is raped by him. Mr. Freeman was sued and at court, when asked if that was the first time he had touched her, she lied and answered affirmatively. On the same day he is released and later killed by "unknown persons," Maya's uncles. This rough justice was made by the order of Grandmother Baxter, Maya's grandmother from her mother's side. She is the opposite of Annie Henderson in the sense that she is white, having no traits of a Negro; she has good relations in the society of Saint Louis and because of her "six mean children" (62) she is respected. Contrary to Momma Henderson who builds her reputation

through work, Momma Baxter builds her reputation on gambling, which is a kind of work for her. As Mary Jane Lupton points out (265) both grandmothers are strong and independent and, I would add, groundbreakers for their times in different ways.

Grandmother Baxter is also a source of strength for young Maya.

When Maya hears that Mr. Freeman was killed, she decides to go into silence because she had lied in court and she believes that her lies had caused Mr. Freeman's death. She only talks to her brother, Bailey Jr., and conceals herself in a colorless cocoon. After some time, her family sent the children back to Stamps, and Maya states that:

The barrenness of Stamps was exactly what I wanted, without will or consciousness…. The resignation of its inhabitants encouraged me to relax…. Entering Stamps, I had the feeling

I was stepping over the borderlines of the map and would fall, without fear, right off the end of the world. Nothing more could happen, for in Stamps nothing happened. Into this cocoon, I crept. (89)

These two women and their contribution to raising the subversive potential of Maya's personality will be discussed later in great detail. Next black woman for Maya to be influenced by is her school teacher Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Correa (2011,82) explains about the way she helps Maya overcome the state of being silent and states that Maya remains in a state of dullness, recognizing neither colours nor people. Things were meaningless until she meets the woman who would break through this state. Mrs. Bertha Flowers, the “aristocrat of Black Stamps” (93) is perfection in disguise for Maya. She was the opposite of Momma; she spoke correctly, wore gloves, had rich black skin and for the rest of Maya’s life she “remained … the measure of what a human being can be” (94). The words which trapped Maya into isolation and in a state of being “dead” to the world will now be the bridge that will lead her away to life again. The encounters she had with Mrs. Flowers will be a kind of a workshop in living, and, little by little, Maya starts speaking again because as Mrs. Flowers told her:

Now no one is going to make you talk possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animal... Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning. (98)

It is from these women that Maya learns to survive in the cage. Myra K. McMurry represents all black people so that they are struggling for come into a realization of their selves. They have a common self who is black and they are unaware of that. The common self shows itself in critical moments. McMurry writes that:

Much of the story of growing up as Marguerite Johnson is the story of learning to control natural responses. Not to laugh at funny incidents in church, not to express impatience when the guest preacher says too long a blessing and ruins the dinner, not to show felt fear, are part of preparation for life in a repressive society. Although much of Marguerite's repression is related to her being a child, the caged condition affects almost everyone in her world. The customers in her grandmother's store were trapped in the cotton fields; no amount of hope and work could get them out. Bailey, for all his clever manipulations, was 'locked in the enigma ... of inequality and hate' (p. 168). Her Uncle Willie's own body is his cage. Marguerite observes with the

sensitivity of the adult Angelou looking back that he 'must have tired of being crippled, as prisoners' tire of penitentiary bars and the guilty tire of blame.' When Marguerite catches Uncle Willie pretending not to be crippled before some out-of-town visitors, she finds the common condition of being caged and the desire to escape ground for sympathy. 'I understood and felt closer to him in that moment than ever before or since' (p. 11).

The same principle works for a group as well as for an individual. What Maya Angelou had understood intuitively or subconsciously as a ten-year-old comes to the level of conscious realization after her eighth-grade graduation. Marguerite's graduation ceremony begins in an aura of magic, but just after the national anthem and the pledge of allegiance, the point at which they normally would have sung the song they considered to be the Negro national anthem, the principal nervously signals the students to be seated. Then he introduces as commencement speaker a white politician who is on his way to another engagement and must speak out of order so that he can leave. His speech and the suppression of feeling his mere presence entails are humiliating reminders to the students of the restrictive white world in which they live. He talks of plans for an artist to teach at Central High, the white school, and of new microscopes and equipment for the Chemistry labs at Central. For Lafayette County Training School he promises the 'only colored paved playing field in that part of Arkansas' and some equipment for the home economics building and the work-shop. The implications of his talk are crushing to the graduates. For Marguerite the occasion is ruined; she remembers that

Graduation, the hush-hush magic time of frills and gifts and congratulations and diplomas, was finished for me before my name was called. The accomplishment was nothing. The meticulous maps, drawn in three colors of ink, learning and spelling decasyllabic words, memorizing the whole of The Rape of Lucreceit was for nothing. Donleavy had exposed us. We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous. (p. 152)

The white politician rushes off to his next engagement, leaving a gloom over the ceremony. One student recites 'Invictus', I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul' but now it is a farce. As Henry Reed, the valedictorian gives his address, Marguerite wonders that he could go on. But at the end, Henry turns to the graduates and begins to sing the song omitted earlier, the Negro national anthem. The students, parents and visitors respond to the familiar song-their own song, and as they sing, 'We have come over a way that with tears has been watered, / We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,' the separate, isolated individuals become a community with a common soul.

The impression of a black athlete fighting a white in a sport contest is also important.

In this sense even a prizefighter becomes an artist, as when people gather at the store to listen to the radio broadcast of a Joe Louis fight. Joe Louis becomes symbolic of their repressed selves; his victory, limited and defined by the boxing ring, is nonetheless a spiritual victory for all Blacks. Like Marguerite's finally triumphant graduation, it is a victory, the significance of which largely depends on the sense of limitation overcome. Louis is simultaneously an oppressed man and 'the strongest man in the world,' and the full import of his achievement in winning the heavyweight champion-ship lies in the context of the restrictions he overcame. The same role that may be destructive to selfhood can, when played creatively, be transformed to a role that enhances self. The artist is able to do what the con men friends of Daddy Clidell do. They find a mark, someone who has obvious prejudices, and use these prejudices against him. Similarly,

the artist uses the bitter reality of his experience to produce a vehicle for essential human values. The artist achieves the same victory as the hero of the Black American ghettos, whom Maya Angelou describes as 'that man who is offered only the crumbs from his country's table but by ingenuity and courage is able to take for himself a Lucullan feast' (p. 190). The artist also achieves a victory over reality; he too is able to take crumbs and 'by ingenuity and courage' make a feast.

When Maya Angelou speaks of 'survival with style' and attributes survival to the work of artists, she is talking about a function of art similar to that described by Ralph Ellison. Speaking of his own early discovery of the role of art, he calls it 'a mode of humanizing reality and of evoking a feeling of being at home in the world. It is something which the artist shares with the group,' and he describes how he and his friends yearned 'to make any-and-everything of quality Negro-American; to appropriate it, possess it, re-create it in our own group and individual images..... [We] recognized and were proud of our group's own style wherever we discerned it-in jazzmen and prizefighters, ballplayers and tap dancers; in gesture, inflection, intonation, timbre and phrasing. Indeed, in all those nuances of expression and attitude reveal a culture. We did not fully understand the cost of that style but we recognized within it an affirmation of life beyond all question of our difficulties as Negroes.'3 Such an affirmation of life, a humanizing of reality, is Maya Angelou's answer to the question of how a Black girl can grow up in a repressive system without being maimed by it. Art protects the human values of compassion, love, and innocence, and makes the freedom for the self-realization necessary for real survival. Her answer, like Ellison's, skirts the reformer's question: is 'the cost of that style' too high? In this sense she and Ellison are religious writers rather than social ones, for their ultimate concern is self-transcendence. It is unlikely that either would deny the practical value of the past twenty years' progress toward attainment of Negroes' full citizenship in America. But ultimately, as artists, their concern is with the humanity which must survive, and even assimilate into its own creative potential, such restrictions as these writers have encountered. For if this humanity cannot survive restriction, and then it will itself become assimilated to the roles imposed upon it.

Pierre A. Walker (1995, 93) writes that What scholars have focused on in Caged Bird does merit attention, but attention to the formal strategies Angelou uses to emphasize what the book expresses about identity and race reveals a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression, a sequence that leads Maya progressively from helpless rage and indignation to forms of subtle resistance, and finally to outright and active protest. The progression from rage and indignation to subtle resistance to active protest gives Caged Bird a thematic unity that stands in contrast to the otherwise episodic quality of the narrative. To claim thematic unity is to argue that form and content work together, an assertion that is an anathema to much current literary theory. However, the formal in Caged Bird is the vehicle of the political, and not analyzing this text formally can limit one's appreciation of how it intervenes in the political. Critics should not focus on the political at the expense of the formal but instead should see the political and the formal as inextricably related. In one of these episodes in which Maya is challenging the white girls contest with her grandmother she considers Momma as the winner of the contest but she is unable to consider her true self and once the girls leave, young Maya realizes that her grandmother has achieved something: 'Something had happened out there, which I couldn't completely understand . . . Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won' (26-27). Angelou claims that her ten-year-old self could not fully understand what had happened, though she did understand that there had been a contest of wills and that her grandmother had won it.

An important feature of the chapter is that Angelou organizes it like a short story. It begins where it ends, with cleanliness and raking the yard bracketing the scene with the white trash girls, and it leaves the reader to work out the relationship between the confrontation with the girls and the cleaning of the yard. Because of this organization, the chapter becomes more than just a narration of bigoted behavior and Momma's and Maya's responses to it: 'Such experiences,' says McPherson, 'are recorded not simply as his historical events, but as symbolic revelations of Angelou's inner world' (49). The 'powhitetrash' chapter takes on the additional dimension of a lesson in the utility of endowing everyday activities such as washing, raking a yard, or minding one's manners with symbolic value as a way of resisting bigotry. Making every minute of the day a symbolic means of fighting segregation, in turn, means that segregation is not a helpless and hopeless situation.

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