



Aesthetics of Representing Trauma of Racism, Silence and Survival: A Critical Study of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract

Aesthetics lies in its form, content and idea of presentation. It is the critical examination of aesthetics terms and theories for male bias, woman-centered accounts of art, its creation and its effects. Black writers attempted to define Black identity and Black humanity in the unjust society of America where aesthetics was started as a new literary discipline. Maya Angelou as a representative of her race African-American has written many poems and autobiographies about their conditions. Autobiographical works offers a unique fusion of history and discourse, of verifiable fact and aesthetic fabulation. The analysis of the first volume of Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is set against an overview of black women in America. This paper deals with Maya's identity since the very beginning when she was a little girl, insecure and ashamed of her physical appearance, and how this identity started to be formed especially after an event that tore her apart (being raped) and how she, through literature and with other people's help, continued working on the building of her identity and the growth of her self-esteem. Due to issues of aesthetic order, as well as social, historic and cultural issues, women writers from the 60s onwards, created an environment in their fictional universes from which it was possible to define and to explore their search for identity.

Key Words: Identity, Aesthetics, and Autobiography.

Aesthetics is a study of art. It is a theory of beauty and its appreciation. Aesthetics studies explore the artists imagination, creation and how the artist perform the works of art, its usage, the effect of its performance on the mind of readers or the audience to whom one presents the art. In its more technical point of view, it is the study of subjective and emotional values, sometimes called the judgments of sentiment and experience. Aesthetics allows for an understanding of how the artist influences and is influenced by his or her art work. Denying an art work its context can deprive it of important cultural, personal or political significance that need not be lost. Artist is a maker and art work is an object. This aesthetics was a new intellectual, cultural, literary discipline in America. It was also a search for a new racial consciousness among the Blacks. Black literature springs from the life of the Black people and it records the experiences of life of African- Americans.

Maya Angelou is known as a representative of her race African-American. Her African-American identity as well as her ideology is well reflected in the themes and techniques she adopts in her writings. Maya Angelou, a great writer, has written autobiographies and poems. This study discusses aspects of aesthetics in the work of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, focusing on the role of African-American woman, the role of Angelou in the society of her times and her identity as an African-American woman, her evolution from a child, to motherhood, experiencing rape and working as a train-driver, and finally the influence of other women in her life. The setting in which Angelou lived incited her to write about universal issues: identity and racism, life aspirations, education, sexuality and feminism. Autobiography and autobiographical or confessional novel offer a unique conflation of history and discourse, of verifiable fact and aesthetic fabulation.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is apt as Maya Angelou compares herself and her entire race to the bird which is locked in a cage but does not sing. A bird sings sometimes to find solace to itself and this is what Maya Angelou has done to share her experience. Most of the literature by African American writers describes past slavery and their culture. It includes who they were and what the white people did to them. African- American literature initially focused on the issue of slavery as presented in one of its popular subgenres called slave narratives. The history of African American people is the story of their forced journey from one continent to the other; a story of their oppression, slavery and liberation. It is also the story of their survival and their sufferings and misery and trouble during this period and of how they escaped from slavery. Angelou had never been a slave, but she was a victim of racism. The works of Maya Angelou includes racial and sexual influences, an analysis of class structure. Maya admires the struggle of Black women throughout history to maintain spirituality and survival in their lives. This was the crucial turn in Maya's life when she went into a trauma of silence because of molestation and raped by boyfriend of her mother. She became mute for several years.

Maya Angelou is a writer of her race. Her poems are the proof of marginalization and subordination of blacks as slaves and marginalization due to racism. The victims were both men and women. African- American writers thought that literature did not have an aesthetic dimension only; rather, they encouraged a propagandist facet in literature much in accordance with Black Aesthetics of the period. As W.E.B. DuBois said in the *The Crisis* (1926): "We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us....insist that our art and propaganda be one." These writers were concerned with a vivid depiction of their lives in American society so that readers could have a thorough knowledge of the hardships they endured. Maya Angelou's autobiography, as well as other stories written by African- American writers, shows how society treated them and how they managed to gain dignity and self-respect. She provides detailed descriptions of the situations she had to face. She wrote her autobiography in order to make people understand how difficult it was to experience the differences between Blacks and Whites, and also between men and women. Her memories are classified within the genre of "novelistic autobiography", similar to the style of slave narratives. Maya was one of the first women writers who were not afraid of telling the truth.

To achieve this I have read the first volume of the autobiography, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* paying attention to both Angelou as a character and to the women who appeared in her life. Due to issues of aesthetic order, as well as social, historic and cultural issues, women writers from the 60s onwards, created an environment in their fictional universes from which it was possible to define and to explore their search for identity. Being women and part of an ethnic minority, but at the same time belonging to the American society, the term “identity” in these women’s texts can be interpreted from three perspectives: social identity, racial identity and individual identity. In the introduction of her book, Maya imagined that she would look like one of the “sweet white girls” (2) with a dress that Momma had sewed. Here we can appreciate the desire to “wake up out of her ugly black dream” As expected, this traumatic incident had consequences for her. Remaining mute for a while helped Maya learn and appreciate other things (like reading among others). This image of a mute girl as a consequence of a tragic event is symbolic of a race muted because of slavery. The places in which Maya lived affected her and her life and gave her different points of view and also knowledge about other cultures.

I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings delves into these issues and illustrates the real hardships of being left out to dry over and over again. Young Maya lives under the threats of terrifying lynch mobs and the daily realities of discrimination and humiliation. Each racist incident contributes to Maya’s self-awareness and shapes her views about injustice. This autobiography represents the growth and evolution of Maya from a gawky “too-big Negro girl with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil” (5) to a confident young woman who has an “immaculate pregnancy” (280). From being the black girl child trapped within the cage of her own diminished self-image, around which interlock the bars of natural and social forces, the Caged Bird (Maya) emerges into the brilliant skies, soaring towards the bright light of Freedom and into the realms of maternal and filial love; with this, Angelou’s autobiography comes to a sense of an ending.

Maya succeeds in establishing distance between the writer and the character, and the details she gives in the stories that are told in the book have nuances of reality, while remaining fictional. There are some events in the book in which the reader wishes they were not real, but there is also humor and lovely subtleties. After she published her first volume, many other African American women writers felt the boost to write about their lives, their achievements and defeats and to liberate themselves from the caged in which they were caught. Maya Angelou has been an icon and she has worked hard during all her life to achieve the equality and justice she had been looking for from the beginning of her life. Like elements within a prison narrative, the caged bird represented Angelou’s confinement resulting from racism and oppression. Angelou emerged from wishing that she could become white in *Caged Bird* to later shedding her self-loathing and accepting a strong racial identity. Angelou depicted women, in an era of cultural transition, and that her books described one Black woman's attempts to create and maintain a healthy self-esteem.

Every confessional or otherwise, incorporates shards of individual and social history into the baroque texture of its ostensibly mimetic world. Such

autobiographical novels provide a new understanding of the lives of women of color who have been marginalized in contemporary American culture. It is through such autobiographies, women writers tend to create the personal space necessary to conquer and transcend prevalent stereotypes of gender, race and class that limit expectations and circumscribe future possibilities. In particular, it does show how sex-role enculturation affect personal and artistic growth in a world that tacitly oppresses both the minority artist and the autonomous female creator. The form of autobiography is or at least has the potential to be, a revolutionary form of writing. Maya Angelou's purpose, with the beginning of her first autobiography, was to tell the truth about the lives of black women. Life has not gifted her better experiences but bitter ones. She has the power to struggle everything. As a woman, Maya Angelou demonstrated the construction of her own cultural individuality throughout her narratives.

Maya Angelou presented herself as a role model for African-American women by reconstructing the Black woman's image right through her autobiographies, and has used her many roles, incarnations, and identities through the style of her writing technique, to unite the layers of subjugation with her personal history. The woman Angelou presented in her autobiographies, especially *Caged Bird*, influenced the woman Angelou became.

Conclusion

To sum up, the title *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is apt as Maya Angelou compares her entire race to a bird who is locked and who sings sometimes to find solace to itself and this is what Maya Angelou has done to share her experience. Angelou in her autobiographical fiction expressed the various forms of resistance of the blacks against racism. Maya's descriptions illustrate that such resistance serves to save the African-American community from drowning in the desperation and despairs that envelopes them. The work serves valuable resource from the psychological and human development perspectives also. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* covers tough issue such as the rape and racism, sexual development and gender issues, identity, and the impact between family members, and the main characters in the play. The narrative strategies that she chooses include construction of characters to produce contrasting effects, parallelism, polyphonic use of language, class registers and so on. Her ideology or the politics of writing is a re-discovery or re-invention of a Black female identity. This is reflected in her craft. Thus, the identity is re-invented through the literary techniques or strategic treatment of themes.

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