

Politics of Agency in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: An
Autobiography*

Abstract *This research paper entitled "Politics of Agency in Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing: An Autobiography" explores the experiences of a black girl who is repeatedly sold, victimized and used as a sex partner by white men. The paper reveals how the black girl is forced to suffer throughout her life and the way she becomes successful to make herself free from all kinds of discriminations with the help of her will to act confidently. Despite the resistance and protests, she is unable to get freedom until she publishes her autobiographical writing. Angelou has an agency that she appears as the master of her story which comes in her own first person point of view. The research paper focuses on the real life encounters faced by African- American women who are trapped in the social and cultural barriers by white Americans in America, their resistance to racist oppression and their voice for independence, self-definition as well as social change. The researcher applies the post- colonial theory of black feminism in analyzing the life of black women in a racist, classist and sexist American society in postcolonial period.*

Keywords: autobiography, agency, double consciousness, discourse of identity, normative femininity

This research paper claims that Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: An Autobiography* provides a means of coming to terms with her identity and thereby claiming an agency. With the help of her autobiographical writing, Maya Angelou transforms herself from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to biases and injustices prevalent in American society. To support this research claim, the researcher applies

Alice Walker's idea of "womanism", bell hooks' idea of "thinking feminist, thinking black", Frantz Fanon's idea of "the fact of blackness" and Gilman's idea of "black bodies, white bodies" of black feminism especially regarding the formation of agency forwarded by Kathryn Abrams in "From Autonomy to Agency: Feminist perspectives on Self-Direction" and by Diana Coole in "Rethinking Agency: A Phenomenological approach to Embodiment and Agentic Capacities".

The autobiography speaks about contemporary issues such as: the effects of emotional, sexual and intellectual development; the complexity of familial relationships, the struggle to overcome prejudice in its various forms; and the journey towards knowing one's self. Angelou presents her bitter experiences by employing fictional devices such as dialogue, character development, unified themes and motifs. Although her grandmother instilled pride and confidence in her, her self-image was shattered when she was raped at the age of eight by her mother's boyfriend. Angelou was so devastated by the attack that she refused to speak for approximately five years. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: An Autobiography* concludes with Angelou having regained self-esteem and caring for her new born son, Guy. In addition to being a sharp account of an African-American girl's coming-of-age, this work affords insights into social and political tensions of the 1930s. Later she studied dance with Martha Graham and drama with Frank Silvera, and went on to a career on theatre. During the mid-1960s she served as northern coordinator for the southern leadership conference at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King. The study is analytical in nature; for it looks at the experiences of African-American marginalized women and the way they challenge all kinds of discriminations, dominations, with the help of their will to act independently to establish personal dignity and self-definition in Angelou's novel. In addition, since the

research is mainly concerned with the textual analysis of the novel, qualitative method was found to be most suitable approach for the present study. The research used both primary and secondary sources. The primary research method was made through first-hand investigation and analysis of the text in question. The secondary data consists of the examination of studies that other researcher have made on the post-colonial African-American literature.

There is not only one post-colonial theory and no single critic can perhaps stand for or articulate for, the post-colonial critical field. Out of the multitude of theories found under postcolonial theory, feminist theory is prominent. Even feminism is a broad area where various types of it are found. Among these, black feminism is the perfect theory from which African-American women's fictional autobiography can be approached. Though the matter is severe with black women writers, all post-colonial women writers explore their cultural specificities in their literary works. Black feminist literary perspective is quite suitable to study the experiences of black women in America. Unlike white, it takes special aspects of black community into account. Black women's question relies not only on sexual rather on racial and class oppression. Black feminism is a theory which studies the experiences of a African-American women. It is a type of feminism which believes that sexism and racism are bound together and relate to one another via intersectionality. It capitalises upon the struggle of the black women. Agency is one's will to act. It is a self-determination and capacity of an actor to act autonomously. It gives power to an individual to dismantle the injustices and segregations.

Maya Angelou, in her autobiographical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, emphasizes instances of the arbitrary punishment meted out by various masters upon African-American women. She repeatedly questions how America, a civilized

nation, could permit its colonists to treat its colonial workforce like brute beast. Maya Angelou elicits our attention and respect in the ways she manages to resist the brutality of her masters, both physically and vocally. Mulumebet Zenebe in his thesis in Addis Abba University at postgraduate level in 2006 on “A Comparative Analysis of the images of Men and Women in Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” states that, “[b]lack women have been dominated and oppressed by cruel and ignorant white men and culture. But they become successful to escape from the dominations of white Americans and culture via strong and sustained resistance against the domination” (35). The prologue of Maya’s narrative highlights the precarious position of the autobiographer as a black woman. White women tend to generalize femininity in terms of their essential qualities. Black men too hanker after the white model of feminine beauty. This discourse on femininity that both white women and black men enter into serves to subjugate the subject.

Unable to conform to normative femininity, Maya’s sense of alienation, her otherness is highlighted in the narrative. She is forced to build her counter image on the ideal qualities of the white lady. Maya realizes that the rejections, which have everything to do with her race, also have to do everything with her personality and this is because her personal identity and racial identity cannot be entirely separated. After a long and tiring bargain with the white receptionist, she becomes the first ever black girl street-car conductor in San Francisco. Attaining the street-car conductor’s job becomes not only the victory of civil rights but also a personal victory of Maya’s sense of self.

Koyana in “The Heart of the Matter: Motherhood and Marriage in the Autobiographies of Maya Angelou” writes, “Angelou is special in the use of humor, self-mockery, linguistic sensibility and the skill of balancing the quest for

human individuality. He is successful to show that racial, class and gender oppression affects the experiences of motherhood in a great extent” (42). Throughout the narrative we see the mystic understanding amongst women coming out as a significant force in asserting one’s selfhood. After the incidence of the rape by her mother’s boyfriend, Marguerite retreats into the world of silence. The physical violence of the black woman, in this case a child, by a black man shows how she is “engendered in the experiencing of race”(Angelou 85). Young Maya’s violator sees her only as someone belonging to the opposite sex. Thus violated by a man of her own race, the child is traumatized and guilt-ridden. The protective mechanism she adapts is to cocoon her in a world of silence. She writes, “I had sold myself to the devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey” (87). Maya is traumatized to the extent of fearing to speak. She is released from this self-built cage of isolation only with the help of Mrs. Flowers. This lady manages the almost impossible task of bringing her out of her reticence.

Bertha Flowers’ relationship with Maya opens new doors for the young child. She gifts Maya the world of books, assures her of her individuality, and makes her feel wanted. In this situation she says, “I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson’s grandchild or Bailey’s sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson” (101). Bertha Flowers frees the thwarted child from her sense of insecurity and identity crisis. By restoring Maya’s sense of pride, she contributes to the growing development of her personality. This respect and affirmation of her being from an elder person instills positivity in her and removes the guilt that resulted from being raped. Mrs. Flowers also instills black racial pride in Angelou, “she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself” (95). Similarly, her friendship with Louise introduces Maya to the world of girly camaraderie, “[a]t last I began to

comprehend what girls giggled about” (142). Angelou relates how through this relationship she begins to come out of her reticence, delighted at the fact that she too could have a friend. The friendship occasions a distinctive development in the young girl. The breaking of the cocoon of introversion, “[n]aturally I laughed too” (142), would go a long way in the attainment of selfhood. The assertion of her dignity as a unique individual comes out most glaringly in the incident where Mrs. Viola Cullinan calls her “Mary” instead of Marguerite. The white lady wants to have control over her by assuming control of her name. The autobiographical subject at this point realizes that intricately connected to her identity is her name, “imagine letting some white woman rename you for her convenience” (109). Here Angelou speaks in a discourse of gender identity but racial difference in relation to the white lady. When the white woman refuses to give due recognition to that identity, she reacts by breaking Mrs. Cullinan’s most cherished dish. This is a marked step towards the assertive self that would emerge by the end of the autobiography.

According to Barnwell, among African-American elements found in the text, blues is pervasive throughout the novel. The blues gives shape to the text to have typical features of blackness. Barnwell argues that, “Angelou’s masterpiece got prominence since it is special for the universal sense of self it portrays. The text owes to the other elements in the African-American cultural tradition such as Negro spirituals, the blues, black vernacular and of course black poetry” (49). The prologue starts with, “What you looking at me for?” (1). This direct address invites the addressees to participate in the subject’s experiencing of her suffering. This ‘you’ is at once the people in the church represented in the text and the imagined readers of the same. Young Maya relates herself to the people at the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church and this gives a boost to her sense of self. Written down in caged bird ‘you’

addresses mature Angelou's black female readership, appealing to them to recall their own similar experiences and thus identify with her. Identification with women who share her plight gives validity to her 'being', thereby making it possible to overcome the diminishment that the subject experiences.

As Angelou proceeds with the narration of her life there is a parallel development in her personality. Through various encounters with racial subjugation and sense of inferiority arising from non-conformity with white standards, there is a gradual understanding of self. In this process of self discovery, the personal relations represented in the text reinforce the self's progressive journey. Momma is one such person who contributes significantly in Maya's growth. Through her Maya learns to survive racial oppression, to assert her dignity, without any violent protest, in the face of crippling humiliation. In the incidence of the "powhitetrash" girls, Mrs. Annie Henderson instills in her a sense of pride. Though the young child fails to understand at the time, she has unconsciously mastered the lesson. The mature Angelou knows that victory can be judged in terms of the ability to hold on to one's own sense of dignity in the face of racist oppression.

Black women in America experience various kinds of oppressions. Mainly in the segregated southern part of America, blacks face predominantly three kinds of oppressions: racism, sexism and classism. In the novel, Maya has been described as a symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America, goes from being a victim of racism with an inferiority complex to a self-aware individual. In one of the interview, Maya Angelou herself confirms that, "[w]hen I wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I wasn't thinking so much about my own life. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people. I kept thinking about that time? I used the central figure- myself-as focus to show how one person can make it

through those times” (153). Maya responds to racism with dignity and a strong sense of her own identity. She is no longer child in the prologue of her narrative who had to create an alternate white self in order to conform to stereotypical notions of beauty.

Maya Angelou was one of the first black autobiographer to present, as Cudjoe puts it, “a powerful, authentic signification of African-American womanhood in her quest for understanding and love rather than for bitterness and despair” (46). Angelou was the significant author who talks loud in addressing blacks’ experiences in America. By expressing herself, she tries to uncover the sufferings of black women through her autobiography. She cried loud against racism, sexism as well as classism and became a model black woman artist in the late 20th century. Her autobiography rescues not only her personal history, but the collective history of all black women. She expresses specific concerns of black girls in America. By giving rise for the new and genre- autobiographical fiction, Angelou keeps the very nature of African-American literature. Postcolonial theory of black feminism invokes the ideas of social justice, emancipation and democracy in order to oppose oppressive structures of reason, discrimination and exploitation. It focuses on the undergoing of African- American women in American white racist societies. Alice Walker states that, “[b]lack women experience different and more intense form of oppression than that of white women” (37). Maya feels physically inadequate in not being gifted with white standards of beauty; thereby developing a sense of shame at her own bodily features. It is the sense of self-hatred that makes the young child fantasizes about transforming in to a white beauty. Angelou Writes:

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about "my daddy must of been a Chinaman" (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty. (2)

Young Maya, thus, distances herself from what she considers an ugly body. The child experiences herself as a diminished individual within racist and sexist confinements with no way to overcome it. But the mature Angelou looking back at the event is able to understand the child's predicament and hence is able to come to terms with herself.

By the end of the prologue of the narrative, the voice of the confused child is replaced by that of the understanding woman. 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. Angelou states, "[t] is an unnecessary insult" (4). By rejecting the awareness of displacement as an "unnecessary insult", the mature Angelou disrupts the discourse on femininity that had occasioned displacement in the first place. In this disruption and thereby her own self-inscription, Angelou is aided by retrospectively claiming intimacy with the black female audience of Stamps, and by looking forward to the black female readers of her autobiography.

The last pages of Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* deal with the teenager trying to comprehend her body, her sexuality. She faces a major identity crisis at this stage too. Comparing her own to the visibly maturing bodies of other girls, she starts believing that she lacks the essential qualities of a woman. She presents, "For a sixteen-year-old my breasts were sadly undeveloped" (274). Indeed she starts fearing that she might turn up to be a lesbian. She writes, "[t]hen the

question began to live under my blankets: how did lesbianism begin? What were the symptoms?" (274). Maya is doubtful about her sexuality because she is called lesbian by white women and she is teased regarding her body structure. In order to test her own sexuality, she engages in an abrupt physical affair with a young man and gets pregnant.

Frantz Fanon, in his essay "The fact of Blackness" dissects the process whereby colonial discourse constructs the colonized as mere surface that is, as black skin and analyses the two responses of the black-skinned colonized to this process. Frantz argues that, "[m]ask, skin and veil emphasizes how the historically determined surfaces of race, gender and culture objectify the colonized as well as how the colonized may counter and overcome these superficial identities imposed upon them by colonization" (15). In San Francisco, it was a dream to see a black woman being streetcar conductor before Maya Angelou's success to be the first Negro girl street car conductor. In fact, it is not the interest to challenge the institution rather a need to survive that leads Maya to apply for the job. But, eventually, it brings another interest beyond securing her income not to pause her education. At the beginning, Maya knows from her mother that it is impossible to be hired as a conductor being a black girl.

Even after realizing the impossibility of being street car conductor, she continues to struggle for the job. When the white secretary of the San Francisco street-car company repeatedly frustrates her attempts for a job interview, Maya is at first persuaded not to take it personally: The incident was a recurring dream, conceded years before by stupid whites and it eternally came back to haunt us all. The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes in the final scene, because of harm done by one ancestor to another, we were bound to duel to the death. Also because the play must end somewhere, I went further than forgiving

the clerk, I accepted her as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer.(260)But then Maya decides that the rejections, which have everything to do with her race, also have everything to do with her personality, and this is because her personal identity and her racial identity cannot be entirely separated. After a long and tiring bargain with the white receptionist, she becomes the first ever black girl streetcar conductor in San Francisco. San Francisco is a place where there was serious racism. Attaining the street-car conductor's job becomes not only a victory for civil rights, as a result, but also a personal victory for Maya's sense of self. The active resistance and outright protest, that is Maya's persisting and breaking the 'color line' of the San Francisco street-car company.

According to Fanon, the colonized either tries a "White Mask" is an effort to compensate for his alleged inferiority, or they celebrate the formally negative attribute of black skin. Black skin is compared with veil because veil as the colonizers' perception signified of African-American culture whose removal confirm the progress of colonial civilizations over the presumably retrograde culture of the African-Americans. Black skin, white masks recounts Fanon's search for, and failure to find, available means by which the black man might overcome his objectification. In black skin, white masks, the black woman or man confronts epidermalization by manipulating the colonizer's language, through direct, silent revolutionary action. For colonized, Fanon argues that, "[i]dentity that the mask, skin signifies is alternately that of their wearers' objectification by colonial discourse and of their wearer's false consciousness"(17). He briefly turns to the mask of black skin, white masks. While the black skin of the Fanon's title is singular, the while masks are plural.In examining the white mask that emerges through the black Maya and her mother's use of the French language, Fanon asserts that the black people who masters the language

possesses the world expressed and implied by that language and draws power from the white people's culture.

The white masks that are language thus bind the African-Americans to their inferiority. For her quest to master the French language ultimately serves only to affirm colonialism, polarizations of humanity according to racial signifier. In addition, the black skinned man must speak in order to manifest the otherwise invisible mask yet the negative values with which the colonizer has imbued his black skin frequently speak to his interlocutor before his words do, as example in black skin, white masks attests. Frantz Fanon argues that, “colonialism drives the colonized to madness by rejecting any individuality claims of the native” (20). This was achieved by the emphasis on physic difference, where thenatives psyche was repeatedly represented as savaged and treated as inferior. In the text, the act of undermining the black students’ future happened at the time of Maya’s eighth grade graduation by the white man invited as a guest speaker. There is an insult by the white man, when the speaker tells the black audience of all the improvements which the white schools will receive- improvements that far exceed the few planned for the black school. The white man named as Mr. Edward Donleavy from Texarkana gives quite racist speech in front of the black crowd during the commencement address of the graduation:

He said that he had pointed out to people at a very high level that one of the first-line football tacklers at Arkansas Agricultural and Mechanical College had graduated from good old Lafayette County Training School. Here fewer Amen’s were heard. Those few that did break through lay dully in the air with the heaviness of habit. He went on to praise us. He went on to say how he had bragged that “one of the best basketball players at Fisk sank his first ball right here at Lafayette County Training School.” ...The white kids were going

to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises. (174)

The white man disheartens and annoys the black crowd including students and their parents together with school administrators by saying that black students will be hired in labor oriented jobs, and they lack mental brilliance so that they couldn't be like the known scientists. Maya's anger does not remain limited to the young Maya rather it gets shared now by her community.

Then there is the action on the part of a member of the black community. The song is called 'Black National Anthem' and every black in the hall sings it. In the same vein to the response against powhitetrash girls, the song avoids an out-and-out conflict with the white oppressor and permits the black community to feel its dignity and superiority. The response is not only noticed from the central character but also from the black community. The resistance is still not exactly an outright protest and it still avoids open confrontation, since the white insulter has left and does not hear the singing.

Black feminism is of crucial interest to post-colonial discourse for two major reasons. Firstly, both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate. Hence, the experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be parallel in a number of respects and both feminist post-colonial politics oppose such dominance. Secondly, there have been vigorous debates in a number of colonized societies over whether gender or colonial oppression is the more importance political factor in women's lies. Sander L. Gilman in his text *Black Bodies, White bodies*, shows how the representation of African women in nineteenth century America in art, medicine and literature,

reinforced the construction of the sexualized female body. He argues that, “[t]he presence of male or female black servants was regularly included in paintings, plays and operas as a sign of illicit sexual activity. African-Americans were criticized badly by whites regarding their physical appearance” (50). In Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged BirdSings*, “powhitetrash” girls mock at Maya’s grandmother by posing the physical appearance of the big black old mother as an ape. They continue the act of mocking up to a hand stand of one of them without any cover of the body in front of Momma.

Momma is the respected religious mother who owns the only black owned Store, and she is the woman who lends money to the poor people without color barrier during the Great Depression. So, how moral just to tease such kind of person? In fact, she gets this treatment since she is black and black than nothing else. Angelou Writes, “[t]hey came finally to stand on the ground in front of Momma. At first they pretended seriousness. Then one of them wrapped her right arm in the crook of her left, pushed out her mouth and started to hurt. I realized that she was raping my grandmother” (29). Maya observes the scene from the place where Momma told her to be. She becomes emotional against the white children who show rudeness and crudity, and she wishes to stone them. The event causes Maya to react with helpless anger and humiliation, but through the response of Momma to the girls, Maya learns that there can be a better and more effective way to respond.

At first, Maya's reaction to the "powhitetrash" girls is anger, resentment, embarrassment, defenselessness. When the girls rape her grandmother’s posture, Maya weeps and thinks of getting her uncle’s rifle and wants to throw peeper on them and to scream at them. When they leave and Momma politely calls good-bye to them, Maya’s rage speaks: When she stopped singing and said, “Bye, Miz Helen,

bye, Miz Ruth, 'bye, MizEloise." I burst. A firecracker July-the-Fourth burst. How could Momma call them Miz? They mean nasty things. Why couldn't she have come inside the sweet, cool store when we saw them breasting the hill? What did she prove? And then if they were dirty, mean and impudent, why did Momma have to call them Miz? (31-32)

However, Maya realises that her grandmother has achieved something and won it. Maya learns a lesson that there is a more effective strategy for reacting to racism and segregation than rage and indignation, a strategy of fine resistance. Here, the response to the racist children is subtle resistance that doesn't harm life, liberty or property.

Black feminists and critiques of post-colonialism have made mere investigation of racism and ethnocentrism at the heart of white feminisms. bell hooks argues that: All too frequently in the women's movements it was assumed one could be free of sexist thinking by simply adopting the feminist rhetoric; it was further assumed that identifying oneself as oppressed freed one from being an oppressor. To a great extent such thinking prevented white feminists from understanding and overcoming their own sexist-racist attitude towards black women. They could pay lip service to the idea of sisterhood and solidarity between women but at the same time they dismiss blackwomen.(8-9)

White feminists do not understand as there is power relation between them and black feminists, and the central point of western feminism is highly problematic for black feminism. The primary source of oppression for white feminists is men, but black feminists raise a number of sources for their oppression such as race, gender and class. Maya states that the world 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. 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 are faced by all children, but black females intensify an already difficult situation. Angelou writes:

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 blacks’ lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance. (265)

Angelou presents the discriminations and insecurities faced by black women in America and the way they face as well as challenge them with the help of their will to act to get equality in the white racist society. The last pages of the text deal with her sense of insecurity at the prospect of mothering an ‘illegitimate’ child. But Vivian and her family turn out to be acceptant of the child. This acceptance of an illegitimate child from Maya’s mother drives away the guilt that Maya had been feeling. At the end of the autobiographical voyage, the teenaged Maya becomes a mother herself and here again it is her own mother, Vivian who reassures her of her capacity for motherhood, Mother whispered, “See, you don’t have to think about the right thing. If you’re for the right thing, then you do it without thinking” (289). The

autobiography ends with Marguerite, a confident mother who is aware of her duties towards her child. She has successfully shed off her timidities and is capable of claiming agency. In this confident mother, Angelou finally locates the independent being that has been evolving throughout America. Hence, Maya Angelou's novel provides plenty of instances of oppression faced by black women and their will to act to challenge all kinds of discriminations to create equality and maintain their position as dignified women

Early twentieth century American society was complicated due to racism, gender, and discrimination and slavery system. This system made blacks' life harder by separating family members from each other. Colonists' rationalized slavery got on the ground of hierarchy that blacks are racially inferior, emotional and barbaric where as whites are superior, rational and civilized. Even the hierarchy was created in African-American's naming pattern. According to Burnard, "[e]very year, slave owners responsible for managing estates were required by American law to submit, slaves and livestock on their prosperities. Whites were listed by firestone and surname; slaves were denoted by modifier referring to his, occupation or ethnicity; and stocks were merely enumerated"(329). Our name is an essential part of our identity, if someone deliberately changes our name; it is a lack of respect for our identity. Maya's name gets changed easily by a white woman from 'Marguerite' to 'Mary' without her consent. The act is totally unkind for the poor Maya, who sympathize to the woman. Maya first began working as a domestic-training for Mrs. Cullinan, she felt nothing but forgiveness for her mistress. Mrs. Cullinan was fat and could not have any children because she had no organs. Even when she pronounced Angelou's name incorrectly from 'Marguerite' in to 'Margaret', Maya smiled and felt sorry for her.

Maya's feelings get changed when one of Mrs. Cullinan's friends suggests that she calls the girl Mary, as this was shorter and easier to say than Marguerite. "Well, that may be, but the name's too long. I'd never bother myself. I'd call her Mary if I was you" (Angelou 104). Mrs. Cullinan received the woman's advice, and proclaimed that Angelou was 'Mary' from now on. It shows the lack of respect white mistresses have for their servants, who are considered as inferior just because they are black. So, it is natural that Maya didn't like being called out of her name. First it meant the white does not respect her, and then it reminds her of the slavery times when blacks were named on the will of their masters. Black servant, Maya, is called out of her name at the time when she is working for Mrs. Cullinan. Angelou writes:

...she called me by the wrong name. Miss Glory and I were washing up the lunch dishes when Mrs. Cullinan came to the doorway. "Mary?" Miss Glory asked, "Who?" Mrs. Cullinan, sagging a little, knew and I knew. "I want Mary to go down to Mrs. Randall's and takes her some soup. She's not been feeling well for a few days." Miss Glory's face was a wonder to see. "You mean Margaret, ma'am. Her name's Margaret." "That's too long. She's Mary from now on. (105)

Mrs. Cullinan gives new name to Marguerite as 'Mary' that is not really related to the original name. The boss provides the reason behind changing the name of her servant as the first name is quite long to call and better to change it with the short one.

Mrs. Cullinan's act is a violation of Marguerite's identity since she is black.

In the narrative, there are other incidents of racism. When Maya and Glory serve Mrs. Cullinan, it is strictly forbidden to share any materials even drinking ones with the white family members. The two Blacks have separate glasses to drink from and their glasses were kept in separate shelves. This is an act of racism that shows the

misrepresentation of blacks as non-humans who shouldn't be served equally with whites the so called humans. One of the noticeable experiences that happened to Maya in the novel is standing up for what you believe in and not allowing anyone to take advantage of you. Angelou demonstrates the racist habit of renaming African-Americans, as shown when her white employer insists on calling her Mary. Angelou describes the employer's renaming as the "hellish horror of being called out of her name" (106). Maya understands that she is being insulted and rebels by breaking Mrs. Cullinan's favorite dish. Marguerite, the main character of the story, is courageous to perform what she needs to do. Her own name that was given to her by her parents is just now so easily being changed by the white women, and the action makes her very angry. She feels that she was just robbed of something important, her name. Even though, Maya is just a young girl, she does not want to tolerate mistreatment regarding any part of her identity. Her inner dignity and pride arise and push her to forget about her need of money and job. She frightfully feels that her opinion might never be valued. That is when she decides to change all that once and for all. Marguerite feels that it is crucial to make a statement. She breaks her employer's favorite piece "china from Virginia" (107). Maya disliked Mrs. Cullinan for changing her name, and it is really painful to let a white woman rename you for her convenience. Following her brother's advice, she dropped and broke Mrs. Cullinan's favorite dishes; a fish-shaped casserole dish and green glass coffee cups on purpose.

Maya rebelled against Mrs. Cullinan. She writes, "When I heard Mrs. Cullinan scream, "Mary!" I picked up the casserole and two of the green glass cups in readiness. As she rounded the kitchen door, I let them fall on the tiled floor" (107). Here, it shows how Marguerite expresses her internal feelings without any hesitation.

After calling her a few discriminatory names, Mrs. Cullinan finally called Maya by her correct, but still mispronounced name: Margaret. Maya, with her active protest against the injustice, deserves her identity at least by getting her favorite name. This is the actual open confrontation against racism next to the hint in the scene of the white dentist.

Maya becomes really ashamed of Glory who does not mind to be renamed by the white lady. There is difference between two black girls named Maya and Glory in the way they accept their new names. Maya becomes angry with the act of the boss, whereas Glory enjoys the new name since it is, as she says, 'short'. Though the black girl is victim of the attack, she does not realize it is an insult. The relationship between Glory and Mrs. Cullinan is well, Glory seems to have accepted the fact that black people are under the control of white section. Even though Mrs. Cullinan renames her Glory, Glory accepts it. However, Angelou did not appreciate being treated like she was an object that could be given a new name whenever its owner pleased, but she also pitied her mistress, and she conveyed her feelings by using an angry tone of writing. She acts against the white women directly in front of her by destructing the precious properties.

Complications regarding names were common in America. The names of thousands of black survive, most often noted in the inventories of deceased white Americans. Burnard's article, "Slave Naming Pattern: Onomastics and the Taxonomy of Races in Twentieth Century America" explores the names of slaves as recorded in white-generated sources and speculates about their deviations. As Burnard remarks:

An analysis of naming pattern can help to determine the extent to which African cultural practices were retained and transformed in the movements of Africans to America and an explication of the rules governing the distribution

of names shows the way whites slaves and animals were differentiated in America. In particular the names given to blacks indicated that white Americans thought Africans as Negroes. (325)

They are indicated as slave naming pattern. Blacks were seldom allowed even the right to name themselves and their progeny says much about Africans' inferior position in a society. African Americans were dominated and tortured with bitter nick names. They were called "nigger or nigra" (188). But white people have their multiple attractive names.

Multiple names of white children distinguished them from black slaves. Naming pattern developed gap between black people and white ones, "whites had three or more names but blacks seldom had more than two names and sometimes only one, and blacks were usually known to whites by their fore-name only or by modifier" (Burnard 328). Whites developed such rituals in order to prove blacks as more like animals than whites. In Angelou's narrative historical time is localized in the specified details of her birth, her childhood days and her vision of the future. If it is shaped in the real historical time of a changing world, she is vanguard of these changes.

Maya Angelou, slowly and gradually, makes her stronger by developing confidence in her. She tries her best to dismantle the discriminations and tortures that are faced by black women with the help of her ability to act independently. In this regard, Kathryn Abrams argues that, "[a]gency manifests itself in various terms of self-definition and self-direction" (811). Maya no longer feels the need to oblige to the white women's demand upon her. She writes:

I dropped the empty serving tray. When I heard Mrs. Cullinan scream, "Mary!" I picked up the casserole and two of the green glass cups in readiness.

As she rounded the kitchen door I let them fall on the tiled floor. I could never absolutely describe to Bailey what happened next, because each time I got to the part where she fell on the floor and screwed up her ugly face to cry we burst out laughing. (110)

Breaking the utensils here is an act of resistance. Destroying her most prized things is an avengement for the attempted destruction of her sense of identity. Thus Maya at this point in her life has gained enough strength to disrupt the white woman's attempts to have discursive control over her by naming her. The episode ends with the autobiographer firmly asserting, "[m]y name wasn't Mary" (111). As Maya keeps on growing, she equips herself to confront the racist and sexist world around her.

Maya's outlook broadens as she comes out of the closed world of Stamps, Arkansas and faces the larger world outside. As Remus Bejan points out, the junkyard of abandoned cars in California where she finds herself in the midst of homeless, abandoned children from different races signals the gaining of "self-confidence, psychological openness, pluralistic and non-racist perspectives" (153). This is in contrast to her earlier inability to see whites as human beings. By the end of the book, she is ready to meet the white world not with hatred or vengeance, but with a pride in her own identity as a black woman.

When Maya's repeated attempts for securing a job interview are given no consideration by the white secretary of the San Francisco street-car company, she is not filled with anger: the incident was a recurring dream, concocted years before by stupid whites. Diana Coole argues that, "[a]gency is a necessary ingredient of politics, while eliminating the Cartesian presuppositions that have, for example, rendered the agency structure debate irresolvable and supported a subjectivist account of agents that is no longer tenable" (136). Angelou uses the flagrant technique of

masking or lying employed by the black community. Lying in the black community is an art-an art that they master or are forced to master as a means of resistance in a racist society. Angelou writes, “[t]he standard questions reminded me of the necessity for dexterous lying” (269). And she does lye with dexterity. The autobiographer recalls how she “wrote quickly the fable of Marguerite Johnson, aged nineteen, former companion and driver for Mrs. Annie Henderson (a White Lady) in Stamps, Arkansas” (269). Maya gets the job. Thus through the discourse of identity with the black community, by such interventionist acts as lying, she disrupts the dominant white society’s discourse. And here again, standing by her side as a staunch supporter is another woman-her mother, Vivian Baxter. It is she who encourages Maya to get the job of her choice, to fight till her racially prejudiced employers are forced to employ her as the first black woman conductor. Vivian Baxter assures Maya that she is beautiful, that every woman is beautiful, and openly guides her in understanding her maturing physicality.

When people are self-determined and have strong will to act, they can easily dismantle the inequalities. In this line, Bell Hooks Argues that, “[i]ndividual commitment when coupled with engagement in collective discussion, provides a critical feedback which strengthens our efforts to change and make ourselves a new. There is one resistance that is different from the rest of passive ones here in the text, through the italicized text, it is shown that Momma directly confronts the dentist and finally orders him to leave the town sooner:

“I didn’t ask you to apologize in front of Marguerite, because I don’t want her toknow my power, but I order you, now and herewith. Leave Stamps by sundown.” “Mrs.Henderson, I can’t get my equipment ...” He was shaking terribly now. “Now, that brings me to my second order. You will never again practice dentistry. Never! When you get settled in your next place, you will be

a vegetarian caring for dogs with the mange, cats with the cholera and cows with the epizootic. Is that clear?" The saliva ran down his chin and his eyes filled with tears. "Yes, ma'am Thank you for not killing me. Thank you, Mrs. Henderson." (190)

The only part of the novel presented in stream of consciousness tells us what Maya thinks in her mind at the time when she was waiting for her Momma outside of the building. Momma threatens the white dentist in front of him which is unusual to her. Actually, this happens in the mind of Maya who fantasizes her grand-mother bothers her enemy. The actual event happened to the dentist is that momma collects an interest of the money she gave him before. The italicized passage reveals what Maya wishes her grandmother could do to the racist dentist. Maya noticed no open confrontation from her Momma against the racist whites, and she knows that is out of momma's philosophy. The act created by Maya herself highlights that subtle resistance is not enough as an overall strategy for responding to racist oppression. On the other hand, the fantasy passage anticipates the kind of outright confrontations between oppressed black and racist oppressor. Although it is only a fantasy, it is the first instance in the novel of a black person openly confronting a racist white, and thus is the first hint that such confrontation is a possibility.

Angelou displays that Momma's approach to handle racism serves as a base for actively protesting and combating racism in America. In this line Alice Walker argues that, "[t]he struggle to end sexist oppression that focuses on destroying the cultural basis for such domination strengthens other liberation struggles. Individuals who fight for the eradication of sexism without struggles to end racism or classicism while supporting sexist oppression are helping to maintain the cultural basis of all forms of group oppression" (177). In the narrative Momma is portrayed as a practical

person whose patience, courage, and silence ensured the survival and success of those who came after her. Maya breaks the race barrier to become the first black street-car operator in San Francisco, and responds assertively to the demeaning treatment by her white employer Mrs. Cullinan. In addition, Angelou's description of the strong and unified black community of stamps demonstrates how African-Americans challenge oppressive institutions to refuse to go along with racism.

Maya's grandmother goes through subtle resistance and active protest to end sexism and racism in America. Her active protest is seen when she confronts white racist dentist who is not ready to treat Maya's rotten teeth and abuses her saying, "I do not treat nigras, colored people" (189). Angelou writes:

Momma walked in that room as if she owned it. She shoved that silly nurse aside with one hand and strode into the dentist's office. He was sitting in his chair, sharpening his mean instruments and putting extra sting into his medicines. Her eyes were blazing like live coals and her arms had doubled themselves in length. He looked up at her just before she caught him by the collar of his white jacket. (189)

Momma's protest begins with passive protest against maltreatment of whites followed by overt objection from blacks against racial acts. She directly attacks the dentist without any hesitation. This action of Momma shows that black women have also become powerful and they are no more under the control of white people. African-American women no more tolerate discriminations, tortures and injustices done upon them by racist whites. Momma's action shows that black women have their own identity and no one can stop them from living their life the way they like as well as they have right to get health and educational facilities. Postcolonial theory of black feminism seeks to understand how oppression, resistance and

adaptation occurred during colonial rule. In Leela Gandhi's Words, "[b]lack feminism can be seen as theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic tasks of revisiting, remembering, and crucially interrogating the colonial acts and perspectives regarding African-American women" (4). Since Maya had been twice sent away by her parents to live with her grandmother, it is no surprise that Maya had an insecurity and identity problem. In the opening pages of the book, Maya suffered from a strong sense of racial self-hatred, fantasizing that she was really white, with light-blue eyes and long and blond hair. As a young girl, Marguerite has no self-confidence.

Maya longs to be someone else, believes she is ugly, and can almost convince herself that she is actually white instead of black. Angelou writes, "I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world" (4). Maya entirely separates her sense of self from her sense of race, and this is part of her identity crisis, since she refuses to accept being who she is and wants a foreign identity that is a compound of received ideas of white feminine beauty. One of the crucial transition points in this evolution over the course of the entire book from the total separation of self-image and race to the connection of the two comes in the part where Mrs. Flowers makes Maya feel liked and respected.

Maya's sense of self-worth is still a little shaky-she thinks Mrs. Cullinan might be making fun of her because she knows about Mr. Freeman. Maya states, "I wondered what they could be laughing about... Maybe she knew about Mr. Freeman" (104-105). Maya still thinks his death is her fault. But when her mistress calls her Mary, Maya suddenly understands what she will and will not accept. She gets herself fired, not caring about the consequences, rather than be called a name other than her own. Maya feels very proud of herself for graduating, even though the white speaker

at the ceremony suggests that she and her class will never be what they really want to be. She understands that this attitude is not a reflection of her-it is racism, pure and simple. When they sing:

‘Lift ev’ry voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty ...

...It was the Negro national anthem.’(178)

She sees that her people have not given up hope, and that in itself gives her hope. Her self-esteem is not shaken by the white speaker; it is now grounded in her own achievements. By reading different books, she develops self-pride. Instead of a poor, unwanted ugly girl, she is a beautiful princess who has simply been mistaken for a maid. She believes desperately in the morals of the stories, and is sometimes able to forget her life for a moment. She has found something she really loves reading and it has given her more of an identity. Therefore, the question of self goes from self-hatred into self-pride or from the idea of taking blackness as ugliness into the slogan ‘I am black and I am proud of being black.’

Maya’s

private history of victimization and survival of her heroic dream of safety for herself and her community assimilates real historical time and projects an image of the black west emerging in national historical time. The text is contingent upon the eye witness testimony of many prices. The real authority of the text originates her original autobiographical consciousness. As Ferguson writes, “[t]his autobiographical sketch is at once a poignant personal history and Maya was born as a black girl in the rural South that is St Louis, Missouri about 1928”(76). Her childhood days were unpleasant. When she was three years old, she was sent to stamps, Arkhanas, to live with her grandmother and crippleduncle where she was haunted by her grandmother and her crippled uncle where she was haunted by her parent’s abandonment.

In the late 1950s, Angelou joined the Harlem writers Guild, where she met a number of important African American authors including her friend and mentor James Baldwin. After hearing civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr. speak for the first time in 1960, she was inspired to join civil Rights movement. The deep ambiguity of the history comes across when we take the text's writing style as autobiographical. The autobiography ends when Maya becomes a mother at the age of sixteen. As John M. Braxton sees *I Know Why Caged Bird Sings* as: The fully developed black female autobiographical form that began to emerge in 1940s and 1950s. The book presents themes that are common in autobiography by black American women. The writer introduces a unique point of view in American autobiography by revealing her life story through a narrator who is at some points a child and other points a mother. (33-34)

In her narrative Angelou is direct and uses reported speech to create the background necessary for her own voice. The tone and style of her narrative are oral and familial as she fashions an epic tale of bondage and deliverance into an elaborate metaphor of the caged bird. Todorova writes, "[e]ndorsement of the book as a contribution of a distinguished groundbreaking oral narrative to worded history" (300). Beyond this the structure of the narrative of Maya's discourse on self, slavery and racism which is not only responsive to scribe and audience but to a group of black people who provide an appreciative background of understanding within the narrative itself.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou explores excessive domination, cruelty, extortion, discrimination, injustices, and brutality, imposed upon blacks especially black women by whites in America. Maya Angelou, a Missouri-born enslaved African-American woman refutes both colonial assumptions and traditional patriarchy, racism, compasses subaltern and bourgeois class

consciousness which is, in one sense rooted in national concerns and at the same time it opposes the national as the cultural symbolic. Accounting her autobiographical description, she suffered throughout the life due to the extreme form of racism, dominance of patriarchy and slavery system. In her autobiography she describes the real sense of feelings of slave experience: the dehumanization of black people, the moral degradation of their master, and ever present violence. She notes that slave masters think that black people are like cattle insensible to the pain of being separated from family members and with no natural affection. All these stigmas are the outcomes of racism and slavery system institutionalized by colonialism.

The autobiography is concerned with woman's oppression both in colonial, racial and traditional patriarchal world. In this autobiography, black woman and her search for liberty, the freedom of black men, cruelty of white people, punishment, discrimination and separation from family members prove that slavery and racism are vital for whites' exploitation to blacks. Maya's mental and physical suffering due to racial discrimination and injustice is based on prejudice and stereotypes created by whites. The text allows us to see why, if the particular culture underlying the colonial system licenses women's oppression, then that patriarchal culture acts as an instrument of the nation. Thus, the national becomes complicit with patriarchy and makes it imperative for women to go beyond the national, evoking the post national because their need to be liberated transcends traditional patriarchy that sanctions such treatment of women either through complicity or by remaining silent. In all situations, a woman like Maya is victimized or biased since white authority holds the blacks in the grip of its ruling ideology or racism. Her separation from the family members renders her situation more miserable and heart breaking. Maya Angelou's engagement with her narratives plays an active role in allowing reader to hear the

voice of slave women. She shows women as acute role rather than object commodity of pity, capable of interpreting their experiences and like men, able to turn their victimization into triumph. She represents her suffering and brutal treatment but in a context that it also becomes the story of resistances. This feminist text focuses on women characters trapped in the social and cultural problematic situations and their fearless voice or resistance to it underlines this feminist text's exploration of social change. Maya Angelou, not only gives a specific account of sexual abuse depravities of the white master, she also gives an evidence of the emergence of a dignified woman capable of responding to prejudices. Amid the excessive oppression of colonialism and slavery, as it was too much to bear she portrays herself as an extraordinary hardworking, resourceful and progressive women. She resists slavery and racism physically and vocally too.

Like early African-American narratives, contemporary writer, Maya Angelou depicts self by using first person point of view. Angelou manifests experiences of marginalized women by taking herself as a central character of her first autobiographical fiction *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The fictional autobiography by Maya Angelou is a specimen of resistance literature. The exploration of feminine experiences throughout the novel enabled the researcher to discover the experiences of resistance and courage in the face of adversity. As black feminists firmly argue, black girl in America experiences triple oppression of race, sex and class. As Angelou depicts skillfully in her novel, racial prejudice occurs to Maya at her grade eighth graduation by the white guest, sexual abuse happens to Maya by her mother's black boyfriend, and economical problems come about to Maya all the way through her young life in the segregated Arkansas. This autobiographical novel directly or indirectly deals with the power of African-American women to

survive and shape their own future despite hardships. The lesson gained out of the current study is that failure is inevitable but it is quite necessary to lift one up again. Angelou, in a crafted manner, tries to make visible the relationships between black and white people via the experiences of the black girl in Southern America. The author Maya Angelou, in her autobiographical text *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, depends on her experience to present all kinds of discriminations, tortures, extortion, and brutality imposed upon blacks especially black women by whites in America. The writer and narrator has self-determination as well as capacity to act independently to challenge injustices that are faced by African-American women. She makes the use of her agency to make doubly exploited women free from victim of racism and maintain their position as dignified women capable of responding to biases. Her narrative reinforces the struggle for the betterment of whole black women and their rise from all troubles. The narrative records the vivid pictures of racism in America, her struggle to overcome it and achievement of her will to act autonomously. Her technique of calling out prejudices succeeds her to prove herself as a conqueror who becomes free from slavery predicament and leads all black women to the path of freedom in America.

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