

**A Study of Post Colonial Resistance in Maya Angelou's
Autobiography**

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

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Abstract:

The present paper tries to bring forth an appreciation of Maya Angelou's use of autobiography as resistance literature. In her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou, rather than focusing on self, focused on race and incorporated several features of Afro- American folk traditions. By incorporating the black oral song tradition, social history and black narratives she rejected the supremacy of the so called Euro-centric autobiography and constructed a new form of autobiography in which she defies the de-humanizing practices by the white people against the blacks, i.e. making the blacks scared of their own blackness, injecting inferiority and destroying their identity by calling them out of their own names. Her depiction of the segregated societies is so vivid that at one cannot deny her autobiography as a mode of postcolonial resistance. It is through this resistance she wrote and brought herself and her people into existence.

Introduction

In the very beginning of the twentieth century W.E.B. Du Bois, the African- American intellectual, suggested a powerful way for the post colonial resistance through his writings combining facts, fiction, autobiography and social criticism. The most fruitful and academic discipline that he suggested – the only way to unburden and resist the racial subjugation – is “by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head.” (4)

In doing so Du Bois pioneered the model of writing which much later came to be known as “writing back to the centre” (Ashcroft et al. 5). Maya Angelou, born Marguerite

Johnson in St. Louis, was very much influenced by Du Bois' dictum of "telling our stories" and especially by his "autobiography of race concept". (qutd. In Olney, 18)

Her autobiography series begins with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (hereafter referred to as *Caged Bird*), and concentrating on the genre by combining autobiography, fiction and history changes the nature of autobiography. Since, autobiography was considered as western or Eurocentric genre focusing exclusively on the self (Olney 19). But Maya Angelou's autobiography inclusively focuses on the race and is "part autobiography, part picaresque fiction and part social history". (Grey 664)

By constructing an Afro-centric genre, Maya Angelou has fought back on socio-political and literary levels. And using autobiography as counter discourse she has, "written herself and has racialized others into existence through her creativity in reaction to the colonial texts". (Alabi 24)

Her first and foremost *Caged Bird* is postcolonial resistance literature which interrogates various aspects of gender, class and racial exploitation of blacks growing up in United States and recounts her fight against all odds to win several battles for herself and her community. In *Caged Bird* she makes clear that the proper way to resist whiteness is possible through the acceptance of the importance of blackness. She narrates herself within the Black community of Stamps, a community that is racialized and exploited in its interactions with white members of the society. Her grandmother, Mrs. Anne Henderson, with whom she and her brother lived as children, is a symbol of the basis of the black society. While her grandmother Mrs. Henderson was the owner of a local general store, she suffered insults delivered by young poor white girls who insist on addressing her by her first name, Anne. Mrs. Henderson's reputation stands partly from being "the only Negro in Stamps referred to once as Mrs." by a judge who mistakenly thought her to be white (Angelou 39). She provides a detailed testimony to the daily insults faced by the members of her family as well as neighbouring blacks who work hard picking cotton, never to get ahead.

The fear of blackness is the real problem. As she writes that as a child she was scared of her own blackness and how she longed for whiteness: "wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my ugly dream, my real hair, which was long and blonde would take the place of the knitty mass that momma wouldn't let me straighten?"(8).Mrs. Henderson, whom the children called momma, is one of the strongest characters in Angelou's life. She is

an overwhelmingly positive role model for Angelou and her experiences are partly responsible for affecting Angelou's transformation from longing for whiteness to appreciating blackness. From a child's longing for whiteness at the beginning of her autobiography, Angelou changes to a critical and politically conscious person when she grows up in her segregated and racial society.

While writing about her personal resistance to colonialism and racism, she writes the history of her society. Early in *Caged Bird*, the young Maya recognises the racial and economic differences and presents it by striking images. She uses the color of chocolate and vanilla ice cream to show how badly segregated her society was. The situation goes as that "people in stamps used to say that whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro could not buy vanilla ice cream" (84). By using the colours of vanilla ice cream and chocolate, she conveys very clearly how divided the society was and how devastating the effects of racism were on racialized people. Some people cannot get vanilla ice cream because they are black, what can they get out of their society.

Angelou also resists the white's colonial practice of changing the names of the black people. By doing so, by putting a name of their choice, the whites attempted to dehumanize and demolish the identity of a person. Resistance to this tendency in abundance in the postcolonial writings and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is another strong instance of it. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou brought these tendency into light through her encounter with Mrs. Viola Cullinan, her white employer. Since, cullinan is white, she renamens her black servants. She attempts to change Angelou's name from Marguerite to Mary because her real name Marguerite is too long. Angelou resists the new name because

Every person I know had a hellish horror of being "called out of his name". It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely constructed as insulting because of the centuries of their having being called Niggers, Jigs, Dings, black birds, crows, boots and spooks. (91)

Angelou's resistance to being named by Cullinan is to break some dishes of the white women. She symbolically destroys a vestige of slavery and exploitation and after braking the dishes she reclaims her name, as Cullinan informs her friend that "young Maya's name is Margaret not Mary". (93)

In *Caged Bird*, there are so many occasions when Angelou asserts herself in various attempts by her society to dehumanize and hold her down. Her job search demonstrates that race is more important than ability in determining whether a person gets a particular job or not, but her job options are also restricted because of her color. When she informs her mother of her decision to apply for the job as a conductorette on San Francisco street cars the race question is raised in her mother's response, "they don't accept colored people on streetcars". Despite her own disappointment, she forms "the noble determination to break the restricting tradition" until she finally gets job. (225)

Thus, it is apparent in *The Caged Bird* that Angelou fought back and wrote back the dehumanizing tendencies prevalent in the inter-racial societies anywhere. She did it through mixing personal experiences with the experiences of her race, mixing literature and history and by mixing we and I. and thus, Angelou resisted "the injustices not just on the socio-political but on the literary levels with her writing". (Lupton 76)

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