

Psychological Sufferings Of Maya Angelou In *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract:

Psychological sufferings involve an enquiry into the relationship between memory and truth and the ways of testimony, can aid one's recovery process. African-American writers have used autobiography to achieve their motto of fighting against racial discrimination, even from the days of slavery. Maya Angelou an African-American woman auto biographer, who won Pulitzer Prize for her first volume of autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is one of her most significant works. This volume opens with a primal childhood scene that brings into focus the nature of the imprisoning environment from which the self will seek escape. This autobiography clearly points out how Maya had suffered psychologically from her childhood days to her delivery of her baby boy.

Her autobiographies celebrate the richness and vitality of Southern Black life that persist in the face of poverty, racial prejudice and psychological traumas. Black feminists and critics of post-colonialism have made mere investigations of the racism and the psychological problems for kids because of the clash between their parents. Through *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou describes her efforts to adapt to the role of a young black girl and proved that the power of her pen is the ultimate product of her personality. This volume opens the doors to the readers to enter into her private world and gives them an insight into the mental sufferings, struggles, ups and downs of her life. The psychological phenomenon of Maya Angelou made her a distinguished personality in the course of her divergent experiences.

Key Words : Psychological, Struggle, Sexual, Racism

Hailed as one of the great voices of contemporary African-American literature, Maya Angelou is best known for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first volume in her series of seven autobiographical books. The book follows Angelou's search for identity and her struggle with sexual abuse, racism and self-acceptance. The succeeding thirty-six chapters

depict her life in Stamps, then in St. Louis, back in Stamps, and finally in California through vignettes arranged in chronological order.

Through the art of autobiography Angelou goes back to the past and recovers through imagination and invention what has been lost, she does it clearly to the whole world. This research article throws light on how Angelou oppressed psychologically from her childhood to the adolescent period. Mary Jane Lupton, praises that “Like an unfinished painting, [Angelou’s] autobiographical series is an ongoing creation, in a form that rejects the finality of a restricting frame.”

Angelou undergoes psychological stages of development which synchronizes with Erik Erikson’s model. The developmental theories concur in explaining mental, physical, sexual, social, and moral development of the human being. Erikson, a psychological theorist, focused on psychosocial development and was a disciple of Sigmund Freud. He traces the personality growth of the child as he interacts with his physical and social environment and the child’s maturing awareness through eight stages of development. Each stage of development is critical to maturity and retains a dynamic impact on the life of Angelou.

Psychology, Jung says, is the study of the psychic process. “Human psyche is the womb of all sciences and art”. Psychological research tries to explain the formation of a work of art. It also looks at the factors that make a person an artist. It deals with materials taken from ordinary human consciousness. The writer raises the material from the commonplace to the poetic. He brings into the reader’s consciousness things the latter might have overlooked. The writer’s work is an interpretation and illumination of the contents of consciousness. He leaves nothing to the psychologist to explain. Following C G Jung, Angelou also deals her psychological problems through her brilliant work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Angelou begins the chapter with the coming of two kids aged three and four, Marguerite and Bailey Johnson, to their paternal grandmother’s house at Stamps, Arkansas. Due to the calamitous marriage of their parents, these kids were shipped from California to Mrs. Annie Henderson whom the children called Momma lovingly. She was running a store there and little Marguerite happened to see for the first time the racial problems in the country and later to experience them. “When I was three and Bailey four, we had arrived in the musty little town” (*Caged Bird* 05). This is her first psychological trauma, after having a loss of parental love the separation of their parents at the age of three. Now she is under the care of her grandmother.

Angelou calls the psychological trauma from her childhood days are the most important loss in her life, because it begins her separation from her mother and father and she never fully regains a sense of security and belonging. Her displacement from her family is not only an emotional handicap but is compounded by an equally unsettling sense of racial and psychological displacement.

After some days, when a black boy ‘messed with’ a white lady, they were so frightened that all black men bustled under their houses to hide in chicken droppings. In Stamps, the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn’t really know what Whites really looked like. This incident makes the Black kids to be aware of Whites.

In St. Louis school, Maya and Bailey were good in their studies, their good behaviour makes the white children to get angry on themselves. Because, they feel inferior in front of these Black children. So they received rudeness and mental stresses from their schoolmates and teachers as a prize.

“we were struck by the ignorance of our schoolmates and the rudeness of our teachers..... we read well.... because our teachers thought that we country children would make classmates feel inferior.” (Caged Bird 63)

Sigmund Freud’s intensive collected background information discovered a common denominator in all of their lives: they had suffered severe and repeated trauma as young teenagers and adolescents. The trauma was mostly some type of sexual molestation and mostly by a member of their own family. Unable to cope with their feelings of shame and guilt as well as anxiety and depression associated with those events, they repressed these traumatic events into their unconscious minds and became physically ill.

The importance of this discovery was that it focused attention on the fact that children are in great need of protection while they are growing up. In addition, it was recognized, for the first time, that the events that occur in the lives of children bear a heavy psychological impact on their later lives. In many ways, this was the beginning of the field of child psychology.

But unfortunately Angelou did not have a good parental care, so at the age of eight, she was raped by her mother’s lover Mr.Freeman, to her it was a gruesome account. After the rape at the age of eight, suddenly she was threatened by Mr.Freeman, that means affected mentally. Mr. Freeman told her that, if she tells that incident to anyone, her brother Bailey Jr.

would be killed by him. Maya loved her brother very much, for Maya, Bailey is her world, so that she couldn't to reveal this to anyone.

“Baily was the greatest person in my world. And the fact that he was my brother, my only brother, and I had no sisters to share him with, was such good fortune that it made me want to live a Christian life just to show God that I was grateful.” (Caged Bird 21)

Angelou refused to speak for five years following the attack, believing that she had killed her assailant—who was murdered several days later—simply by speaking his name. This tragic incident gives a great trauma for Angelou, psychologically. For Angelou, unluckily the lack of growing awareness in psychological and physical trauma continue from childhood led to all types of child abuse, from sexual trauma to corporal punishment and neglect.

When Angelou is seven years old, she sees her parents for the first time in her memory. Baily, Sr., making an unexpected visit to Stamps, stuns the child by the reality of his presence. For the first time in her young life, she need create no elaborate fantasies about her father. This shows Angelou and her brother's nostalgia towards her parents. Bailey Sr., who has been described by others as a man who had respect for neither morals nor money, is an arrogant show-off, taller than anyone Maya has ever seen and with “He had the air of a man who did not believe what he heard or what he himself was saying. He was the first cynic I had met.” (Caged Bird 55)

Angelou eventually returns to San Francisco to live again with her mother. As a maturing teenager, she begins to awaken sexually. Uncertain about her sexuality and fearful of being unwomanly, she turns to her mother, who tries to reassure her. But her lack of development a new, unfamiliar emotional responses leaves her still curious and ambivalent. In California also Angelou suffered psychologically, she spends part of one summer at a trailer camp in Southern California with her father and his lover Dolores. When returning with him from a jaunt into Mexico, Angelou is stabbed in a quarrel with Dolores. Fearing another murderous reprisal, Maya is unwilling to return to any of her homes. Instead, she seeks refuge in a car junkyard.

This autobiographical narrative clearly depicts Momma's personality through Angelou's psychological view, it begins to loom larger than life and personal dignity and meaning. On one occasion, for example, Momma takes Angelou to the local dentist to be

treated for a severe toothache. The dentist, who is ironically named Lincoln, refuses to treat the child, even though during the depression, the doctor says:

“Annie, you know I don’t treat nigra, colored people.” “I know, Dentist Lincoln..... “Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don’t treat colored people....“Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s.” He had never once looked at me. He turned his back and went through the door into the cool beyond.” (Caged Bird 188-189)

Angelou suffers not only from the pain of her two decayed teeth, which have been reduced to tiny enamel bits by the avenging, but also from the utter humiliation of the dentist’s bigotry as well: “It is too terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness.”

The major psychological event in this volume is Angelou’s decision to test her femininity by having sex, because she did not aware of this, she does not have anyone to tell and discuss about the inner, physical and psychological changes, therefore she takes a danger decision. The action results in pregnancy. For many young women, a teenage pregnancy might end in trauma, abortion or parental rejection. But for Angelou, the pregnancy ends in her mother’s acceptance and the birth of her son. Sidone Ann Smith connects the ending and the birth to Maya’s affirmation of self: “With the birth of her chid Maya is herself born into a mature engagement with the forces of life.”

“Three weeks later, having thought very little of the strange and strangely empty night, I found myself pregnant.” “After a short labor, and without too much.... My son was born.” (Caged Bird 283 & 288)

This volume, however, ends on a note of awakening with the birth of her son and the beginning of a significant measure of strength and confidence in her ability to succeed and find her place in life. This final picture of her mother Vivian as a confident and compassionate mother lovingly bent over her daughter’s bed, evokes the brown, nurturing figure of her childhood fantasy. By asserting her faith in her instinctive, preserving motherhood. Vivian not only qualifies the book’s implicit image of her as cruel stepmother, but also consummates Angelou’s growing sense of herself as an adult, life-giving woman.

She calls the blacks to rise out of physical pain and psychological cruelties, to rise from victims of rape, abuse and abandonment and to the determination to be no victim of any kind. Her first volume shows, however low she may be perceived she is certain to rise for higher ground. Her narrative power exerts resistance and rebellion which is almost overt and challenging.

Sandra O'Neale suggests that

“The process of [Angelou's] autobiography is not a singular statement of individual egotism but an exultant explosive revelation that she is because her life is an inextricable part of the misunderstood reality of who Black people and Black women truly are.”

Maya Angelou expresses her feelings, thoughts, experiences and psychological effects with clarity of vision, camera-eye-like precision and masterful control. She is capable of peering, absorbing, and translating everything into truth. In fact, she responds to life with creative imagination, and artistic sensibility. Maya Angelou is not blind to the denials, deprivations, degeneration, exploitation, and dehumanization of the women in a male dominated society. Notwithstanding such a state of despair, she likes the women to live with a sense of independence, and realize their individuality in the modern society. In this context that Angelou gets identified as a social critic. She is fully governed by her faith and conviction that the Society and the Establishment can be altered for the better. In fact, one is made to feel the pulse of the suffering humanity.

Angelou's autobiography is a reflection on the subservient status of a Woman as a Second sex and as a recluse. Her broodings on how women come across assorted degrees of subjugation and psychological effects which depending on their customs, socio-economic class, and the Nation in which they reside is an eye opener. She highlights different types of repressions that Black women in America surface, Blacks largely gets subjected to the tripartite force of racism, chauvinism and classism.

Racial prejudice and Negro resistance, ignorance, sense of worth, segregation, sexual abuse and displacement which leads to mental trauma are the major topics addressed in the coming fragments. Maya has proven herself as an emblematic appeal for every Black girl growing up in America, goes from being a victim of racism with a lowliness complex to a self-aware individual.

Through her writings, Angelou accepted the challenge of the lost years, she accepted the challenge of the process of self-discovery and reconfirmed her commitment to life's struggle, and Angelou depicts these problems by using her pen through the Fourth World Literature.

Lillian K. Arensberg suggests that

“Maya Angelou is a reborn: once, into a life-affirming identity recorded within the pages of her narrative, and again, when she re-creates that life as author of her autobiography. If one must enter a dark night of the soul in order to emerge radiant, then Maya Angelou’s “terrible beauty” shines clear to the sky.”

Angelou and her brother Bailey, they never lead a happy life with their parents, because their family severely affected by displacement. Angelou and Bailey used to change their living places with her mother, father and grandmother, it causes them not to get proper friends and school education in a particular place. From the beginning to the end she keeps on moving from one place to another finding her identity and location and from where does she actually belong? Which place? All these questions harassed her mentally. In order to get satisfactory answers she roams from one place to another and try to establish her own identity.

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Abbreviation

Caged Bird - *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*