

## IMAGE OF RACE IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*

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**Introduction :** In 1970 a child with skinny legs and muddy skin was introduced into African-American autobiography. Born Marguerite Johnson, she became known as Maya Angelou, an actress and dancer who performed in George Gershwin's musical, *Porgy and Bess*, and in Jean Genet's satirical French play.

The Blacks, who are two years before in 1968, wrote a series on African heritage for educational television. Angelou well known as entertainer was urged by James Baldwin and by the cartoonist Jules Feiffer and his wife Judy to try her hand at writing an autobiography. After several refusals, she agreed, the result was a unique series of autobiographical narratives. As the first-person narrator, Angelou is able to tell her unique story while at the same time sharing the contributions of Black writers who came before her. From the first moments of *Caged Bird*, she establishes communication with earlier African-American art forms: with the poetry of James Weldon Johnson; with the Negro spiritual; with the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent).

In that sense, the point of view is becomes collective one; the voice not only of the single autobiographer but also of the African-American literary community. Dolly A. McPherson (1990), views the collective ties with the Black community as a central theme in Angelou's autobiographies, while Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes of the "collective identity of African-American women" (1990:222) with in the Southern landscape and in the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou.

Momma Henderson is a church going, God-fearing woman whose store is the heart of Black socializing in Stamps. She has strict ideas about taking God's name in vain and even stricter ones about relating to White folks. Believing in the safe approach, Momma insists that talking to "White-folks" is taking a chance with "one's life" (39).

Despite her many strengths, she is a woman who submits to racist behavior without a struggle, maintaining the submissive manners of the past. Maya is unable to accept her grandmother's position that for Southern Blacks to survive in a racist society, they must develop a strategy of obedience. She disagrees with Annie Henderson's passive stance but fears how Whites might react to Bailey's having witnessed a Black man's death at their hands. Annie, fearing White vengeance, sends the children to the safety of California.

In another racist episode, Momma takes Maya to the town's White dentist, who humiliates his Black patients by saying that he'd rather put his "hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (160) in every instigation, it is Annie's tolerant that interrupts Maya, who is beginning to articulate her anger about racism. Maya's response is to invent a fantasy in which Momma Henderson holds Dentist Lincoln by the collar and orders him to "leave Stamps by sundown" (161).

This stock phrase from a western movie grants Annie the male authority that Maya wants her to have: Annie is the hero, and the dentist is the unforgiving villain. The fantasy, printed in italics, is Maya's way of dealing with the dentist's racist behavior and with her grandmother's inability to question his racism.

Uncle Willie, Annie Henderson's son, has been under her special care, since he was a child, crippled at the age of three, when a babysitter dropped him. Willie walks with a cane to support this disfigured body.

In an early scene, Maya witnesses Momma, burying Uncle Willie in a large bin, under layers of potato toes and onions, to avoid being detected by the Ku Klux Klan still Uncle Willie has an active role in running the store, which is the hub of the Black community. He handles the sales on the night of the heavy-weight championship between the famed Black boxer, Joe Louis

(1914-1981), and a White man. All of Black Stamps gather at Annie's store to watch the historic fight. Men and women living under the yoke of racism think that if Louis loses "we were back in slavery and are yond help" (113).

Through her experiences with the strong women of Stamps, Maya "links her 'self' to the Southern roots and history of her people-to a succession of American Negro female survivors" (Fox-Genovese 1990:230). Her involvement with the Black community in church, at the store, at picnics, empowers Angelou, enabling her to understand the rules for survival in a racist society.

Through her growing racial awareness, she is able to articulate her observations of racism, if not aloud then at least in her thoughts. Thus she can witness the Joe Louis fight and fear that in his possible defeat each blow to Louis's body is like a Black man being beaten or a Black maid being slapped for being "forgetful", (113) it is many years before Angelou is able to put such thoughts into spoken words to share with White and Black audiences.

The episodes concerning the 'powhitetrash' girls and Dentist Lincoln provide apt examples of Maya's reaction to the racism coming from the White community. As an historical document, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* captures the vulgarity of White Southern attitudes toward African-Americans.

Angelou presents this material by recalling racist characters, so real that one can feel their presence Mr. Donleavy, Mrs. Cullinan, and other Whites whose bigotry dramatically affects Maya's childhood and leaves such a scar on the mature Maya Angelou that when she finally returns to Stamps in 1982 to film an interview with Bill Moyers, she refuses to cross the bridge into the White part of town.

This discussion of Maya's character development follows the example of Stamps in dividing the Black and White communities along racial lines to reflect the divisions that were there, when Angelou was a child and that presumably still are there.

Of the Whites who affect Maya's character, one is Mrs. Viola Cullinan of a woman Maya works for, when she is ten. Mrs. Cullinan has a vast array of cups and glasses, including the ones set aside for the servants. The woman treats Maya as though she does not exist, calling her Mary or Margaret instead of her given name, Marguerite. As Maya explains, Whites called Black people too many other names for centuries for her to tolerate Mrs. Cullinan's abuse.

Maya tries to get fired by coming late to work, but to no avail. One day, in a moment of anger, she smashes several pieces of Mrs. Cullinan's prized china. Dolly A. McPherson sees Maya's intentional breaking of Mrs. Cullinan's china as an affirmation of Maya's "individuality and valuable" (1990:45), the clash is demanded, if Maya is, to save herself from the dehumanize atmosphere of her surroundings.

Another White whose bigotry affects, Maya is Mr. Donleavy, the guest speaker at the eighth-grade graduation at the segregated Lafayette Country Training School.

Amid all of the pride and loving detail that surround Angelou's exquisite description of graduation day, Mr. Don Leavy hangs over the event like a dense White cloud.

All his ideas about education are formed along divisions of race and gender. Some first-rate baseball and football players once graduated from Lafayette County Training School, her remarks, never mentioning the Black girls.

He is pleased that because of his efforts, the White students at central High School will be getting new microscopes for their laboratories. When Donleavy leaves for a more pressing obligation, having destroyed the educational dreams of the Black children, Henry Reed, the valedictorian, turns to the audience and starts singing the Negro National anthem.

Angelou, who wrote the script for the film version of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, presents the graduation scene quite differently, making Maya more central to the episode and making her more rebellious than she is in the book. Maya, not Henry Reed, delivers the valedictory speech.

Instead of reading her prepared remarks, she attacks Dunleavy's concepts, saying that Black boys don't need to be football players and the Black girls don't have to be cooks or housekeepers. The audience is at first shocked and even more so when Maya, not Henry, begins to sing James

Baldwin Weldon Johnson's inspirational Negro national anthem, which had been banned from public ceremonies in the schools.

But they gradually join her until their voices rise in a powerful chorus. As the camera pans the faces of the proud Black audience, the film ends.

Sadly Maya's triumphant rebuttal of his sexist and racist beliefs was not the reality at the 1940, graduation of the Lafayette Country Training School, which occurred two decades before the civil-rights movement and the reluctant integration of public schools. There are many other White people in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, people Maya knows through direct exposure, like Mr. Donleavy, or through a general awareness of their power over her life.

Most of the men, like Mrs. Culliban's husband, stay blurred in her memory, like all the other White men that he had ever seen and attempted not to see. Once, she departs Stamps for the more relaxed atmosphere of San Francisco, Maya discovers a few Whites who are kind to her. Miss Kirwin, Maya's civics and current events teacher at the predominantly White George Washington High School, is a "rare educator" (182).

Although Maya is one of three Black students Miss Kirwin shows no favoritism, she attaches no difference to the fact that Maya is Black. The adult narrator confesses that the Miss Kirwin was "the only teacher I remembered" (184) and perhaps the only White person who had ever befriended her.

The first side of the triangular setting in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* begins on a train that takes Maya and Bailey to a small Southern town. The setting then moves to St. Louis and San Francisco. In Stamps, Arkansas, she is engulfed with feelings of rejection and abandonment, countered by her love for Momma Henderson and her love of poetry.

In Stamps, Maya is naïve and innocent. She has fantasies of power involving her grandmother and herself as they conquer racism. A second considerable theme in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is confinement.

Maya continually thinks caged, unable to get away from the homemade dresses; he must wear to church, unable to escape the reality of her Blackness. She is imprisoned by her job for Mrs. Cullinan and by her restricted chances in a separated school system.

There are several hurting scenes where she and Bailey, entrapped in the church service, are subjugated by hysterical laughter. At times Maya urinates at her pew as if in defiance of the limitations charged on her young body. She catches, too, by the bigotry of Stamps, whose town fathers ask that she and all African-Americans reside in only one section of town and stay only those schools in their part town.

Confined inside her body, Maya supposes that a 'cruel fairy stepmother' has wickedly converted her from a blonde child to a dark one. In much African-American literature, one finds the theme of dehumanization, meaning the state of being denied human qualities such as intelligence, sensitivity, and so forth. Thus, the hero of Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1944) is depicted as less than human; he crouches in a sewer and gnaws on a pork chop bone, as do dogs.

Claude McKay, in his poem *It We Must Die* (1919), uses a series of animal references to convey the dehumanization of Black men in America—hogs, barking dogs, and packs of doglike men to emphasize the ferocity of Whites and the victimization of Blacks.

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