

## **Maya Angelou's Battle with Alienation in I know Why the Caged Bird Sings**

**Qudsia Zaini**

English Language Center  
College of Science for Girls, Abha  
Department of English, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia  
Correspondent Author: [gzuni@kku.edu.sa](mailto:gzuni@kku.edu.sa)

**Mohsin Hasan Khan**

Department of English  
Faculty of Arts, Greiger Campus. King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia

Received: 8/20/2020

Accepted: 1/17/2021

Published: 2/24/2021

### **Abstract**

The themes of the existential crisis have been central in taking up their work in different domains of human experience and exhibit the force of departure from the so-called standardized norms and values of a society. These themes have been taken up by many authors of African American origin. This paper attempts to represent and explain the theme of alienation through an in-depth analysis of Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The crisis of identity, gender, consciousness, and everything seemingly comes to question in the powerful narratives of these kinds of writings. One such African American author is Maya Angelou. She is one of those who take these themes with great force and tries to free herself from the shackles of the so-called canonized versions of human values and seeks to explore a world in which she recreates an establishment of her new perspectives and freedom of humanity. The paper concludes by showing the struggles for recognition and self-awareness and developing onto a stronger woman pushed by her feeling of alienation.

**Keywords:** Alienation, autobiography, freedom, self, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

**Cite as:** Zaini, Q., & Khan, M. H. (2021). Maya Angelou's Battle with Alienation in I know Why the Caged Bird Sings. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies* 5 (1) 177-186. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol5no1.12>

## Introduction

This research paper studies the theme of alienation especially emotional isolation or dissociation from others. In Angelou's autobiography, the main character is consistently alienated and experiences isolation from society. She is separated from their loved ones on and off, both physically and psychologically. The objective is to identify how the writer faces the challenges of racism, sexism, and identity crisis in *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an autobiography. An autobiography is defined differently by many literary dictionaries and books of scholarly definitions. Cuddon (2013) defines autobiography as an account of a person's life by himself or herself.

The African American Autobiography has a different literary significance. The traditional autobiography focused on the biography of the concerned author. The critics could access African American Autobiography from several other perspectives like cultural, historical, psychological, ideological, philosophical, and literary. The uniqueness of black writing is the set of experiences very different from the world of white American heroic tales. Following the epic tradition, the African American autobiography is much like the prose narratives of voyages by white Americans in the nineteenth century that represent the evolution of the epic genre. The writers of black autobiography have shared and shaped American culture, and their works are very much a part of American literature.

## Significance of the Study

The present research will help in identifying the elements of angst and alienation in black writings therefore, enriching the tradition of black canon. It will also shed light on studying female writers in particular and their sense of feminist ideas giving way to robust black feminism.

## Literature Review

Angelou is considered one of the most well-known American authors for her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and her numerous poetry and essay collections. She, being a spellbinder storyteller, exhibits and reflects the multiple themes which African American societies face.

Angelou has been described by Butterfield (1974) as one who "does not submit tamely to the cage. She is repeatedly thrust into situations where she must act on her own initiative to save herself and thereby learns the strength of self-confidence" (p.4). She has written biography like many other black writers, but she transcends the limits of society set for African American writers and female writers. Arensberg (1976) describes the heroine as

An unbeautiful, awkward, rather morose, dreamy, and "too-big Negro girl," young Maya Angelou seems an unlikely heroine.... the child Angelou writes about is unadmired, unenvied, uncoddled as she makes her precarious way (on "broad feet," she reminds us) into the world." (p. 111) and yet she still remains a realistic heroin of the autobiography.

Darling (1981) stated "She is outside and inside at the same time, looking at all of it with double vision "

Angelou tells the readers, "There is nothing quite so tragic as a young cynic because it means the person has gone from knowing nothing to believing nothing" (p.22). What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the "other(s)", but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjects. The interlocutory characteristic of black women's writing is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or 'generalized other,' but a dialogue with the aspect of 'otherness' within the self. The complex situatedness of the black woman as not only the 'Other' of someone but also as the 'Other' of the other(s) implies...a relationship of difference and identification with the 'other(s)' (Henderson, 1989).

Samuels (2007) defined Angelou's autobiographies as the "most significant" and he further describes:

Angelou's autobiographies mostly follow the classic pattern of black autobiography: the journey out, the quest, the achievement, and the return home. All six of her serial first-person narratives arise directly from the aesthetics and traditions of the slave narrative, the blues, the contemporary African-American journey narrative, and formal autobiography. Each is characterized by an affirmative pattern of moral growth and the reconstruction of the collective myth of black female identity. As blues traveler, she confronts being afraid and bereft through sheer style and courage and offers picaresque progression experiences. (p.14)

She had a vast range that sympathies with multiple and extended arrays of thoughts related to class and history as well as color lines from the perspective of her black struggle for freedom. Other themes recur and include the role of the colored mom, nostalgia for roots, wounds of racism, freedom, sisterly relations, the call to African land, the presence of a slave, black female sexuality, feminist values, complex confrontations, and also the accumulation of wisdom. These volumes aim at the merging of history with fact, other genres of literature like fiction and poetry, and the experience of religion at first hand.

Samuels (2007) writes about the many struggles she went through growing up as an African-American woman in the mid-1900s. She overcomes these issues through the characters, books, and words. The book not only talks about Maya as an individual, but she writes on behalf of whole African American Women. She has published a series of five autobiographies. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name*, *Singin' Swingin*, and *Getting' Merry Like Christmas*, *The Heart of a Woman*, *All Gods Children Need Travelling Shoes*, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* and *Mom & Me & Mom* are her autobiographies. Bloom (2019) says, "I think that this is part of the secret of Angelou's enormous appeal to American readers, whether white or

black because her remarkable literary voice speaks to something in the universal American “little me within the big me” (pp.1-2). Particularly in her best book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou achieves an almost unique tone that blends intimacy and detachment, a tone indeed of assured serenity that transcends the fearful humiliations and outrages that she suffered as a girl. Hundreds of thousands of readers have found in *Caged Bird* an implicit image of the resurrection of their innermost self, a fragment of divinity that transcended natural birth, and so can never die. The uniqueness of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, being an autobiography, it is not only identifiable with Maya Angelou being her thoughts and words but the Universal Americans. Angelou has contributed to literature by bringing out racism faced by African Americans and breaking barriers for women through her writings. Maya Angelou fearlessly scrutinizes the cultural stigma and her life's details and creates an extraordinary fiction through her work.

### ***Alienation***

The German philosopher Hegel took Rousseau's (2012) thought and declared that humans “live in a world shaped by his work and his knowledge, but it is a world in which man feels himself alien, a world whose laws prevent basic need satisfaction” (“Literary Themes Alienation.” *Literary Articles*, 2012). Hegel extends the ideas of Rousseau developing an argument that modern man will always feel and face his struggle of needs and his position in society, which results in the feeling of separation, detachment, and estrangement. Hegel's idea of alienation was further echoed in the writings of Karl Marx, who is considered as one of the most influential thinkers of the concept. Marx's explanation of alienation was in terms of a state which exists with a condition that when things that should go naturally and together are kept apart. An earthly biographer, Angelou (1969) attains a unique quality that blends alienation and reconciliation. Maya Angelou writing on literature, like all her writings are characterized by originality as she has written by what she has felt, thought, realized, and her living experience. Her autobiography is a blend of a child's perspective and an adult's outlook. In this book, she confronts racism, sexism, violence, and loneliness.

### **Methodology**

This paper is an in-depth textual analysis of Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which focuses on alienation and debilitating displacement and estrangement. The autobiography elaborates on sexual abuse, racist discrimination, and the knowledge of her origin. This paper aims to study the manifestation of different characters and their struggle that is very frantically linked with alienation, results directly from the real-life struggle. Many of them have a feeling that disconnects them and they are instantly detached from other human beings, and with the primary institutions of the society, which can help us to grow and shape ourselves. Although alienation is mostly a negatively powerful force that can drive humans in a very negative realm surrounded by the ideas and impulses of self-pity, violence, and vulnerability but here in Angelou's case this has served as a way of self-introspection as well as build a path to intellectual freedom.

## Analysis and Discussion

### *Family Disengagement*

The book opens with family separation. Maya and her brother Bailey were sent by their parents to live with her grandmother after their parents end their calamitous marriage. This feeling of displacement started early on in her life. She feels vulnerable for most of her childhood. She does not have a sense of belonging, being a black girl, growing up in a segregated American South. Being uprooted and sent away from her parents, Maya has trouble feeling that she belongs nowhere, and she has “come to stay.” Her displacement and feeling of being abandoned stems from her family. This separation is always damaging to the well-being of children. The sister and brother embark on a journey by train under the custody of a porter, who abandons the children but tags their wrist with instructions “to whom it may concern” and not addressed to Annie Henderson. Stamps is thoroughly segregated. Here Maya feels she barely knows what white people look like. The autobiography shows not just geographical distance, but emotional and psychological spaces as well. Social distance gives rise to neglect, fear, loneliness, hatred, distrust, and feelings of guilt especially for a child, who has been destitute of parental warmth, and the feeling of “home” is missing. The child has good reasons to feel he's cut off and feels he's strongly neglected. As his/her parents are not part of his/her daily life, the child may feel that they detest him/her and start questioning their birth. This explains why Maya is distant from her father, whom she regards as a stranger, and she is indifferent towards him, and his words mean nothing to her she said, “He was so unreal to me I felt as if I were watching a doll talk” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969, p.56)

For Christmas, Maya and her brother get gifts from their parents. The gift is a blond, blue-eyed China doll. It tortures the children, and they blame themselves for their rejection. They feel isolated from their parents. When their father Big Bailey comes to visit them in Stamps. Maya regards him as a stranger. He does not stand up to her expectation as he owns a car; he speaks, like a white man. She describes him as “blindingly handsome.” The seven-year-old Maya says “her world was humpty dumptied never to be out back together again”. He drives them to their mother. Even her mother's striking beauty is a shock to her. She says, “My mother's beauty literally assailed me” (p. 59). Family split is the hardest taken by children. She is not happy with her mother but tries to engage herself in the alien city of St. Louis. The place is chaotic, exotic, and loud.

Like the whites, Maya fails to understand her father as well. She says, “he sounded more like a white man than a Negro. Maybe he was the only brown-skinned white man in the world” (Angelou, 1969, p. 58). Another disastrous relationship is with her mother she says going to their Mother appears to Maya as going to ‘Hell’ (Angelou, p. 59) and their father is the “delivering devil” (Angelou, p. 59) who is taking them there. Seeing the beauty of their parents a strange feeling arises in Maya's mind. She starts feeling that she is not their daughter as she does not resemble them. As Bailey looks like their parents, probably he is the only child of Big Bailey and Vivian Baxter. Now her dearest brother, whom she loves the most in the world and with whom Maya has shared the pain of being “unwanted children” (Angelou, p. 60), has got his parents, but

Maya still feels displacement and alienation in her heart. Maya never comes out of this belief that she is not beautiful like her parents or brother. Maya's not so handsome features distance Maya from her parents and, also intensify her loneliness.

### ***Self-scuffle***

Her appearance and the sense of not belonging with anyone or anyplace have a negative effect on her from a very young age. She dreams that one day she will wake up out of her ugly black dream, and she would be white with long blond hair and blue eyes instead of the unattractive "negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil" (Angelou, 1969, p.3). She equates beauty with being white. She grows up with this notion as Als (2020) observes that Angelou's witnessing of the evil in her society, as directed towards Black women, shaped Angelou's young life and informed her views into adulthood.

### ***Racism and Resistance***

There are many instances where Maya feels indignation, humiliation, and helplessness. The terrorization of the black community can be seen when Maya describes Willie, the crippled son of Annie Henderson was made to hide in the potato and onion bins in case the white mob comes looking for a victim to lynch. The second incident in the book is about the three girls who visit Momma's Store. The white girls mock her by copying her gestures. Maya describes them as "dirty, grimy, and snotty-nosed girls." All Momma does is hum the gospel without saying anything to the girls.

Meanwhile, Maya is in rage and tears. Momma turns out to be stronger by demonstrating her maturity. She does not retreat inside the Store or stoop to the level of the girls' terrible behavior. But she stands her ground and refuses to be displaced physically or emotionally. Momma and Maya's victory lies in the fact that they are neither dirty nor insolent.

Her identity, her name, is robbed when she takes up a job in Mrs. Cullinan's place. They start calling her Mary. She chooses to change it according to her convenience. Her renaming constitutes a racial displacement. Maya feels enraged. She knows she would not be allowed to quit. So, she starts lacking in her work and finally decides to break Mrs. Cullinan's expensive china making it look like an accident. Mrs. Cullinan drops her politeness and insults Maya. Maya cannot take this naming while she could not revolt against it. So, she finds a subversive form of confrontation.

Maya tells about numerous instances of subtle black resistance to racism in her book. The black southern church is an avenue for rebellious resistance. The preacher in the sermon criticizes the whites without naming them. His attack against greedy, self-righteous employers is actually an attack on white farmers for paying miserable wages to black field labor. Movies and other popular culture of the 1930s spread dreadful condescending racial stereotypes of blacks. But Maya's secret joke, in the movie theater, allows her to be a winner in the battle against the movie's negative

portrayals of black people. Maya laughs and mocks Kay Francis' movie because the white actress is loved by the white audience who looks like her mother, a black woman. Maya delights in this irony; Bailey agonizes with a yearning for his mother. Just seeing her likeness makes him miserable. These opposite feelings between the brother and sister eventually create a distancing between them.

Maya feels empowered with these instances of resistance, but Maya knows this kind of resistance rarely affects great change, even within her African-American community. Instead, such resistance often tends to protect the blacks from dying in the desperation and despair that surrounds them. Maya's description of Joe Louis's victory is an empowering rejection of the negative stereotypes thrown upon blacks. Even after the victory, the desperate fact remains: Louis must bear the hopes and dreams of the entire black American community. White society prevents blacks from progressing in society. If a few black Americans who received little public attention for their achievements were successful in gathering public approval, they were considered role models and heroes such as Louis, who became the hero of the black community being looked upon for his strength.

Edward Donleavy insults the black community in his speech. The black community's excitement over graduation comes from the fact that they have fought very hard to receive a very ordinary education. In Stamps, the graduating eighth grade and high-school classes conquer the burdens of poverty and racism to earn their diplomas. He brags about the improvements in the white school, aimed at increasing the opportunities for white students. Donleavy feels the students and their parents should appreciate him for his wretched efforts. The black children bow their heads and are forced to think that they should not value their education and their graduation. Maya says Donleavy "exposed" them. She feels disgusted and angry. Even Henry Reed's speech cannot pull her out of the disgust she feels for the whites.

In the graduation chapter, there is demeaning by a white person, when he tells the black audience of all the development and progress which the white school will receive—improvements that far surpass that of the black schools. This is Maya's first response of humiliation and anger: "Then I wished that Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had killed all white-folks in their beds" (Angelou, 1969, p. 152), shared now by the community: "[T]he proud graduating class of 1940 had dropped their heads" (p. 152). Then there is the action on the part of a member of the black community—Henry Reed's improvised leading the audience in "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" (p. 155)—that at the same time avoids a permanent conflict with the white oppressor and permits the black community to feel its dignity and superiority: "We were on top again. As always, again. We survived" (p. 156). But the Negro national anthem makes Maya realize the hard work put in by the blacks for the opportunity she has got. She feels pride in being a part of "the wonderful, beautiful Negro race."

Another incident is in the dentist's chapter, where Maya and her grandmother are insulted by the doctor. Momma takes Maya to Dr. Lincoln, whom she had helped financially by lending him money in his time of need, interest-free. But he refuses to attend to Maya. Maya thinks Momma is brave and has brought Dr. Lincoln to his knees, but in reality, Momma compromises with her morals to extract money from Dr. Lincoln as he had refused to treat Maya's tooth. "[M]y policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (p. 160). In this chapter, we see resistance from Momma. Momma knows she is at fault. Maya's dire situation pushes Momma to demand interest. Dr. Lincoln's ingratitude and the racial refusal to treat Maya are humane. He does not realize the generosity of a black woman (Momma) who saved his practice with her money. The passage in italics is Maya's imagination of Momma transformed into a superwoman. Momma and Willie laugh about the incident. Blacks justify their illegal actions because they are forced by necessity and the way, they are treated by whites.

### **Rape**

Maya now knows what a family is like, but soon, she is lost again when Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend, molests her and later rapes her. After the incident, Angelou could not comprehend what she had experienced. Mr. Freeman stops her from telling anyone about the incident, or else he would kill her brother. Being eight years old, she obeys her mother's boyfriend. She feels miserable and in pain after the incident. As Jacobs (1994) observes, In this retelling of the rape, Angelou reconstructs the child self who simultaneously experiences the suffering of the victim while responding to the remorse of the victimizer. Immediately after the assault, the perpetrator is [. . .] asking that she, the abused child, understand that he did not mean to hurt her [...]. In that moment of awareness, the physical and emotional boundary violations converge as the child feels both her pain and the pain of the abuser. Empathy is thus engendered under conditions of sexual violence. (p.62)

Her behavior changes as the incident have a great impact on her. Herman (1992) remarks, that traumatic events "shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others", and "cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (p. 51). But she ends up telling her brother about the abuse. After the incident, Angelou stops speaking completely because she believes Mr. Freeman died because of what she has spoken; her mouth would utter "something that would kill people randomly." Her guilt-ridden response to Mr. Freeman's sexual assault reveals that she has not adjusted well to her parental abandonment and life of isolation. She confuses Mr. Freeman's sexual assault. She believes, she has done something wrong because he threatens to kill Bailey. She is a child looking for affection. When Mr. Freeman ignores Maya for weeks, she feels rejected. She does not even want to confront herself that she is raped. Herman (1992) explains childhood sexual trauma survivors,

face the task of grieving not only for what was lost but also for what was never theirs to lose. The childhood that was stolen from them is irreplaceable. They must mourn the loss of the

foundation of basic trust (p. 193). "means she has at her disposal are frank denial [. . .] and a legion of dissociative reactions" (p. 102).

Here blacks suffer from racism and oppression but being humans; they can also infect suffering on the other people. Mr. Freeman takes advantage of Angelou's innocence. Maya feels Bailey has grown apart, yet he remains the closest and most important person in her life. He pushes her to disclose the identity of the rapist. She reveals her rapist's identity. She knows Bailey will not betray her trust. He never blames her for the rape. Even after returning to her grandmother, Maya's silence regarding the rape persists. She continues to carry her unarticulated burden of guilt. She isolates herself in the library. From the books, she understands that women cannot be heroes. She wishes that she could be male.

Maya moves to San Francisco. She attends a school without racial segregation. She takes interest in drama and dance along with her other subjects. This city seems to be continually changing compared to Stamps because of the war. It is here Maya finally feels at home.

She has insecurities about her sexuality as she feels boyish. This caused her to think she is a lesbian. To check this out, she finds herself a boyfriend. This experience is life-changing. She not only finds out that she is straight but ends up being pregnant. Vivian supports and encourages her without any questions asked. She gives Maya the most crucial advice about trusting her motherly instinct. Vivian is admired in this book for her strength, caring nature, and honesty.

### Conclusion

Maya is a young black woman who suffers from a universal struggle of being an adolescent, along with being colored and a female. She had learned to survive in the most challenging conditions and is trying to liberate 'herself' from 'herself' because of her color and physical appearance. She feels displaced and lost because she is forced to move from one place to another because of her parents. Her parents leave her, her mother's boyfriend rapes her, she is separated from her grandmother, she is completely lost. Her writing depicts a real picture of injustice, segregation, violence faced by Afro-Americans. It is a harsh criticism of the plight of the colored and how society oppresses and excludes them for their basic rights. While going through this process, she develops into a unique being challenging the existentialism of being and emerges a stronger individual defining her limits and standards. Her incessant struggle to carve her niche finally comes to a standard serving as a beacon of African American rights in its own respect and ushering a new era in the rights of the feminist movement. Angelou's, *I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings* overflows with signs of alienation, and disaffection.

### About the Authors:

**Qudsia Zaini** is a lecturer at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. She has a Master of Arts degree in English Literature, a Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English Literature, and a Bachelor of Education in English. All the degrees were awarded by Aligarh Muslim University,

India. Her fields of interest are Postcolonial Literature, Literary Criticism and Theory, Women's Literature, and Teaching of English. Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6228-7316>

**Mohsin Hassan Khan** obtained his Ph.D. from Aligarh Muslim University, India. He has been working as an Assistant Professor at King Khalid University Abha, Saudi Arabia. His research interests include Postcolonial Literature, Indian Writing in English, and Literary Theory. Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0125-3854>

### References:

- Als, H. (2020). *Maya in the mirror*. Available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/08/05/songbird>
- Angelou, M. & Braxton, J. M. (1999). *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A casebook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Angelou, M. (1969). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House.
- Arensbery, L. K. (1976). *Death as a metaphor of self in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. *CLA Journal*, 2, 272- 2910020040035
- Bloom, H. (2019) *Maya Angelou*. Blooms Literary Criticism.
- Cuddon, J. A. (2013). *A dictionary of literary terms and literary theory*. London and New York: Blackwell Publ.
- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. New York. Basic Books.
- Herton, C. (1987). *The sexual mountain and black women writers: Adventures in sex, literature and real life*. New York: Anchor- Doubleday.
- Jacobs, J. L. (1994). *Victimized daughters: incest and the development of the female self*. New York: Routledge.
- Literary Themes Alienation*. (2012, August 18). <https://literacle.com/literary-themes-alienation/>
- Wilfred, D. S. (2007). *Encyclopedia of African American literature*. New York. Facts on File.