

The Subaltern Frame - The Untouchable and the Unread: Locating the Real Life of a Black Woman in Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"

^a Soumy Syamchand, ^b A. Selvaraj

^a Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, India

^b Associate Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, India

Abstract

The paper analyses feminine aspects in the works of Maya Angelou. She can be called a feminist writer on the basis of her feminine perspective. She shows the woman who is struggling to find out her identity in the male dominated world. Most gender scholars avoid the simple truth that gender roles are more of self-ascription than societal. The society is not a person but persons who come together with a common language and culture. This paper explores the creation of self and gender identity in Maya Angelou's "I know why the caged bird sings". The investigation pictures the ways Angelou negotiate, manipulate and reconstruct the Black-female identity. We discover that Angelou espouse a feminist and xenophobic approach to represent the female-story by portraying first, a treble victimization and then the subsequent victory of their Black-American female protagonists.

KEYWORDS: feminism, patriarchy, social construction, stereotyping, treble-victimization

The emotional, sexual, and Psychological
stereotyping of females
begins when the doctor says:
"It's a girl" (Shirley Chisholm).

Shirley Chisholm observation reminds us marginalisation and gender discrimination starts from the birth itself. African American literature had started long before the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s with the oral performances which provided some relief for African American slaves, whenever possible, from the physical and psychological horrors of their lives. Although these oral performances went on through the 17th century, the written literature did not emerge until the 18th century, principally because slaves were forbidden to acquire literacy or were not allowed to be involved in any intellectual exercise that might engineer or ginger a rebellion against their masters. However, gradually, writing began to emerge, and the earliest forms came from the Northern and Eastern states where slaves had a modicum of educational exposure. Some of these writers are Lucy Terry who wrote a verse entitled, "Bars fight, August 28, 1746" (1746), Jupiter Hammon who wrote "An evening thought: salvation by Christ, with penitential cries" (1760). There were also Phillis Wheatley's poems on "Various subjects, religious and moral" (1773).

Let us take the female folk for instance; it is the woman who victimizes the woman, hence the popular cliché, "victim victimizing a victim". The woman is the instrument of oppression on her fellow woman. Unlike the African literature, where African literary writers present the mother-in-law and the "other woman", who could be a concubine or a co-wife as the 'devil' that bewitches the wife (the victim), the African American female writings that I explore in this paper, presents the woman as a reassuring agent, a helper to her other woman. African American female writings most times see the 'other woman' as a victim and a co-sufferer in the world of men, and so to succeed they collaborate and fight as fellow victims in a patriarchal society.

The prevailing concepts of gender is while one's sex as a man or woman is determined by anatomy, of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine its temperament and behaviour are largely, if not entirely, social constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. As Simone de Beauvoir put it:

One is not born, but rather becomes,
a woman.....
It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...
which is described as feminine.(78)

By this cultural process, dominating, adventurous, rational, and creative; the feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional.

The African American female writer, from the beginning of the time when women started writing, saw writing as one way to enact history and redress her story, first and foremost as a black["man"] and then as a human woman. Story telling as an African activity was embraced by most African Americans as a way of purging their emotions on the one hand, and seeking victory on the other. Thus, Black female literature evolved and the key for the woman writer since then is the word "search" which suggests, scrutiny, attention, mindfulness, intentness, thought, observance all to the intent of recovery of that which was lost Eko (2005) is of the opinion that women artists in America are naturally in the vanguard of using their arts in creative responses to cultural, social and historical pressures. In congruence to Eko's opinion, we posit that the Black woman artist in the face of gender discriminations in America, seeks to redress the female story by asking the question what happened to the Black and female side of the wonderfully, just, right and God-given mandate to equal enjoyment of freedom for everyone. Over the centuries, male dominance has engendered woman's inferiority complex, voiceless traumatic experience and negative self-perception. But today, African Americans, the women in particular, find outlets in the outcry of their female protagonists: from Sojourner Truth's fearless challenges and affronts to Jeanie Stark's resistance in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, to Maya Angelou's triumph in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Most importantly, the Black feminist literature emerged as a literature of self-assertion, self-definition and has grown by negotiating the cultural taste within the dominant Euro-American culture. In sum, Black consciousness naturally lent itself to the expression of creative/cultural activity, gender reconstruction, etc. such that cultural and self-revivals were the agenda of Black American women literary investigations and literary writings as a whole.

Maya Angelou once said "if you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude"(68). In a way, this really sums up the poem, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", and her autobiography *I know why the caged Bird sings*. Angelou was born in 1928 and lived with either her mother or grandmother for most of her early years. At aged eight she was raped by her mother's boyfriend, who was then killed by her uncle. She became mute for six years after this. Angelou, after leaving home, worked in many Jobs, including the first *Negro* lady car conductor on the San Francisco streetcar, a professional dancer, a Madame. As a single, black mother in the 1950's and 1960's she worked hard, gaining acclaim with the publication of "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings". The poem was published in the volume "Shaker, why don't you sing?" in 1983. It draws inspiration heavily from a poem by Paul Dunbar Lawrence called "Sympathy". She has since published many other works, and in 1993 read a poem at president Clinton's inauguration function.

Maya Angelou's poem "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" displays the meaning and feeling of slavery in comparison of free people. Angelou explores herself identity through poetic device. Poets portrayed as being about the slavery of the African American people and explore and perceive how people really felt about the freedom of others and how it is all taken for granted. Poet explicates dehumanizing effect of racism and identity crisis in America. The structure of poem – six stanzas long, four to five lines in each stanza, and blank or free verse. The racial discrimination towards woman is explode by the phrases "narrow cage", "bars of range", and "wings are clipped".

"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is a contrast between a caged bird and a free bird and their different characteristics, emphasizing on the caged bird.

A free bird leaps on the back of the wind
And floats downstream till the current ends
and dips his wing in the orange sun say

and dares to claim the sky.(1-4)

The poem begins by speaking of the free bird and how it has the freedom to go where ever, whenever, and can claim the sky because there are no other birds to contest with. The stanza shows us that the free bird is lazy and would rather float on the wind instead of make its own path.

But a bird that stalks down his narrow
Cage can seldom see through his bass of
Rage his wings are clipped and his feet
are tied so he opens his throat to sing.(5-8)

The second stanza introduce the limitations set upon the caged bird, and how there affects the bird as the bird is still proud and cries out for freedom.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
Of things unknown but longed for still
And his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom. (9-12)

The third stanza emphasizes the caged bird and its plight. It tells of how the caged bird sings for freedom, as if it still has hope for things it does not know of. The caged bird can "be heard on the distant hill". The bird is shown to rebel against all that holds a back in an attempt to be freed.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
And the trade wind soft through the
Sighing trees and the fat worms waiting on
A down bright lawn and he names the sky his own.(13-16)

The fourth stanza is about the free bird again, and how the bird although free "think of another breeze" showing that although the bird is free, the bird is not content and is greedy to have even more freedom, but again it shown to be lazy in that it is on but not enough to do something about it. Then describes how easy things seem to come to the free bird, as there are worms waiting for it at down on the lawn.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of
Drams his shadow shouts on a nightmare
Scream his wings are clipped and his
Feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.(17-20)

The fifth stanza depicts the bird in its cage, the cage that has now become the grave of the bird's dreams, and once again the caged sings of freedom.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
Of things unknown
but longed for still
And his tune is heard
on the distant hill
For the caged bird
sings of freedom(21-28)

The final stanza is a repetition of stanza three which serves as an emphasis on the caged bird, the bird song is to be feared and respected.

Maya Angelou in "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" exposes the pervasiveness of racism and gender discrimination in American life. The poem is an astute piece depicting an American rural Black community in the 1930s and its worldview. In sum, as Black female activists, Angelou Maya out-rightly reject the ill treatments that the society, which is dominated by men, inflicted on the woman in America. The poem expresses the Black-female consciousness by indirectly testifying to the resilience of the authors who prevailed over personal adversity to become the muse of many women in the African American female literature. In consonance with other female writings, African American female writers demonstrate a collective consciousness of the black woman's predicament in America. The dilemma for the black woman was a world subjugated by patriarchy. Moreover, a significant feature of Angelou Maya's writing is her openness to exposing personal experiences. She has been commended by critics for her natural quality of authority and her assurance with words. In her works, many connections can be made between her life and those of her characters. Thus, her emotional intimacy with her creations animates her work for the new reader. Angelou's subject matter ranges from history to everyday life, and to spirituality. She explores themes like abortion, sadomasochism and rape, all of which are described bluntly. She has been criticized by most African American critics for dealing harshly with her Black male characters. In sum, confronting racist and patriarchal systems, Angelou envisage a world of justice, equity and fair play in a society of men and women, White and Black, using their texts as moral as well as artistic documents on a mission.

Patriarchal system is often characterized as alienating, dehumanizing and without proper commitment to the female gender. Man's hegemony makes the woman to feel unsafe and demoralized. The male gender has employed the other woman as instrument of oppression on the female. For instance, from the excerpt below we see the picture of the other woman at play as Marguerite. Generally, Walker and Angelou's works function as aspects of Black history and become firmly rooted in the network of the theme female/female friendship. Moreover, text show a development in the womanist process Angelou is evolving. For instance, the two novel portray the woman as a victor and heroine in a man's world through the help of other women. We also see Marguerite versus Mrs. Flowers who serves as her stimulant to her transformation. Marguerite's and her alter egos, lot is pathetic and complex and amply illustrates the American situation of the treble oppression of the Black woman. From the epistolary realism, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* portrays a total shift from the old unassuming attitude of the female in Black American society to the assertive, resilient and bold new women who see male hegemony as oppressive, and that which must be fought against.

In conclusion, most feminist critics explore the tensions and ambiguities inherent in Angelou's poem attempt to define a feminist position and at the same time subscribe to what sounds like a stereotyped view of femininity and womanhood. However, the point re-established in this paper is that, individuals are the architects of their lives; that though the society prescribes roles each gender should operate, individuals, the females in particular have the rights to reconstruct their identities in the society that they are part of, reconstructing identity either as assertive women or naïve females. Angelou Maya actually narrates her experiences of her teenage. She explains that, life is usually negative as it is characterized by all trauma and psychological suffocation (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 88). Her journeys in the poem not only show her physical movements but also her psychological transformation that makes her move from an inexperienced young Black girl to a tough woman in the end. The poem show the movements of two Black women who moved from naivety to self-actualization and realization. From the exploration of the poem, I accentuate the position that individuals can reconstruct their self-identities contrary to societal ascriptions.

References

Angelou, Maya. "I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings". New York: Random House, 1969. Print.

---. *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1970. Print.

---. "Shaker, why don't you sing?". New York: Random House, 1983. Print.

Chisholm, Sherley. Interview by Kisner, Ronald E. "Kicks off Campaign for U.S. Presidency WABC, New York. 28 Apr. 1972.

Television. de Beauvoir, Simone. *Second Sex*. France: Gallimard, 1949. Print.