

Portrayal of Existential Crisis in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract

Maya Angelou is one of the prominent African American writers. She always writes on the themes like family, motherhood, race, displacement and journey very seriously and works to get free from the constraints of the so-called canonized versions of human ideals. She also looks to discover a world where she can establish her own unique viewpoints and the freedom of humanity. The underlying concepts of the existential crisis have played a significant role in how people have approached their work in various spheres of human experience. A lot of authors with African American ancestry have addressed these issues. *I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou is filled with indications of estrangement and dissatisfaction. Maya Angelou's in-depth examination of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, incorporated in this research is an attempt to represent and explain the concept of alienation. These writings' poignant narratives call into question the crises of identity, gender and consciousness. The research concludes by demonstrating the struggles for acceptance and self-awareness and how they helped the character to grow into a stronger woman, driven by her sense of alienation.

Key Words: Existential crisis, portrayal, self-awareness, poignant narrative and alienation.

Maya Angelou was a celebrated novelist who also performed as a dancer, singer, activist and scholar. Her distinctive and innovative autobiographical writing style is what made her most well-known. Marguerite Ann Johnson, better known as Maya Angelou, was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 4, 1928. Additionally, she was renowned for her prowess in the calypso and cabaret dance genres. She sold albums of her recordings during the 1950s while performing professionally in the United States, Europe and Northern Africa.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, an autobiography of Maya Angelou's early childhood, was released in 1969. Her account of finding personal courage in the face of bigotry and childhood tragedy struck a chord with readers and earned her a *National Book Award* nomination. There were over a million copies of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, having been sold globally and have been translated into many different languages. Later, Maya Angelou released six more autofictions, the last of which was *Mom and Me and Mom* (2013).

Maya Angelou published several collections of poetry, including the *Pulitzer Prize*-nominated "Just Give Me a Drink of Water Before I Diiiie" (1971) and several anthologies of essays. Additionally, she recorded spoken poetry albums, such as "On the Pulse of the Morning," for which she received a *Grammy Award* for Best Spoken Word Album. Written and read at President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993, the poem was first published. She also received *Grammy awards* in 1995 and 2002 for her spoken poetry albums.

In theatre and the movies, Maya Angelou worked as a writer, actor, director and producer, among other things. With the release of *Georgia*, she became the first African American woman to have her screenplay converted into a movie. In 1973, Jerome Kitty's play *Look Away* won Maya Angelou a Tony nomination for her supporting performance. In 1977, she played Kunta Kinte's grandmother in the television miniseries *Roots*. Numerous organisations, both domestically and internationally, honoured her for her literary efforts. Wake Forest University presented Maya Angelou with an offer for the Reynolds Professorship of American Studies in 1981. In 2000, President Clinton honoured her with the *National Medal of Arts*. She was a part of the first group of writers to be inducted into the Wake Forest University Writers Hall of Fame in 2012. She was given the *Literarian Award* for Outstanding Service to the

American Literary Community the following year by the National Book Foundation. In addition, Maya Angelou delivered numerous commencement addresses and received more than 30 honorary degrees during her lifetime.

When Marguerite and her brother Bailey were three and four years old, their parents sent them to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother, Annie Henderson who they called 'Momma'. During the Great Depression, Annie Henderson, a religious lady who ran a grocery store in the middle of a black neighbourhood, had a big influence on her kids' lives. Even though she was stunning both inside and out, Marguerite found her grandmother's responses to racism to be perplexing and upsetting.

Marguerite frequently experiences feelings of outrage, shame and powerlessness. Marguerite's description of Willie, the disabled son of Annie Henderson, being forced to hide in the potato and onion bins in case the white mob showed up looking for a victim to lynch, illustrates how the black community was terrorized. The three girls who visit Momma's Store are the subject of the second occurrence in the novel. The white girls imitate her gestures to tease her. Maya describes them as "dirty, grimy, and snotty-nosed girls" (28). Momma never speaks to the girls; all she does is humming the gospel. Marguerite is furious and crying in the meantime. Momma proves her strength by displaying her maturity. She does not hide inside the store or adopt the girls' deplorable behaviour as her own. But she does not back down and would not allow herself to be emotionally or physically moved. The key to Annie Henderson and Marguerite's success is that they are neither rude nor filthy.

Marguerite loses her identity and her name when she accepts a position in Mrs. Cullinan's house. They started calling her 'Mary'. She decides to alter it as she considers it necessary. Her renaming entails racial segregation. Marguerite is furious. She is aware that quitting would not be permitted. As a result, she begins to fall behind in her duties and ultimately decides to smash Mrs. Cullinan's expensive china while pretending it was an accident. Mrs. Cullinan abandons her decorum and belittles her. Marguerite has no choice but to accept this designation while also being unable to rebel against it. She discovers a subversive method of conflict. Even while she knows this kind of opposition rarely results in significant change, even

within her African-American community, Marguerite feels emboldened by these moments of resistance. Instead, this kind of resistance frequently serves to keep black people from perishing in the misery and desperation that surrounds them.

In his address, Edward Donleavy disparages the black community. The exhilaration of the black community during graduation derives from their long battle to obtain an extremely basic education. In Stamps, the eighth-grade and high-school graduation students overcome the challenges of racism and poverty to receive their diplomas. He boasts about the enhancements made to the white school to give white pupils more chances.

Donleavy believes that the parents and pupils should thank him for his pitiful efforts. According to Marguerite the black youngsters bowed their heads and were made to believe that their education and graduation should not be valued. Donleavy ‘exposed’ them. She is angry and disgusted. She is so disgusted with white people that not even Henry Reed’s speech can make her feel otherwise.

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 Marguerite’s first response of humiliation and anger Marguerite’s initial outburst of embarrassment and rage is as follows: “Then I wished that Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had killed all white-folks in their beds” (Angelou, 152), shared now by the community: “(T)he proud graduating class of 1940 had dropped their heads” (139). 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” (142) that at the same time avoid a permanent conflict with the white oppressor and permit the black community to feel its dignity and superiority: “We were on top again. As always, again. We survived” (143). But the Negro national anthem makes Marguerite realise 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” (143).

In the dentist's chapter, there is another episode where the dentist insults Maya and her grandmother. Annie Henderson brings Marguerite to see Dr. Lincoln, whom she assisted financially by giving him a loan at no interest when he needed it. But he declines to help Marguerite. Marguerite believes that Momma has been courageous and has driven Dr. Lincoln to his knees, but in truth, Momma has compromised her values in order to obtain payment from Dr. Lincoln for not treating Marguerite's tooth. He declares, "I'd sooner place my hand in a dog's mouth than a nigger's, according to my policy (147). In this chapter, Annie Henderson's opposition is evident. Mom knows she's to blame. Annie Henderson is forced to request interest due to Marguerite's desperate circumstances. Both Dr. Lincoln's ungratefulness and his racial discrimination towards Marguerite are decent. He is unaware of the kindness of Annie Henderson, a black woman who donated money to save his practice. The italicized text depicts Marguerite's imagined version of Momma as a superwoman. Willie and Annie Henderson chuckle over what happened. Blacks defend their criminal behaviour by claiming that they are compelled to do so due to necessity and the manner that white people treat them.

Thus, Maya Angelou's writing paints a realistic picture of the injustice, segregation, and brutality that African Americans experience. It is a serious analysis of the predicament of people of colour and how society deprives them of their fundamental rights. Through this process, she transforms into a singular being that challenges the existentialism of being and emerges as a stronger person who defines her boundaries and standards. Her constant battle to find her place in the world finally yields results, making her a beacon for African American rights in her own way and starting a new age for feminist rights.

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