

# Racial Oppression and Trauma in Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing

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Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and German  
Language and Literature

Mia Mrkalj

**Racial Oppression and Trauma in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the  
Caged Bird Sings***

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Associate Professor

Osijek, 2021

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Department of English

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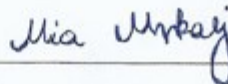
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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the topics of racism and fight against racist oppression, as well as rape and the trauma caused by sexual violation at a young age, in Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). It shows the development of the main character through the hardships of her childhood. Angelou starts the narrative as an insecure child, filled with racial self-hatred and insecurities, which is discussed in the first part of this paper. Through the years, influenced by her surroundings and experiences, she learns to stand up for herself and fight racial discrimination. Firstly, she observes the people around her in their fight against racism, then she slowly discovers her own voice and, finally, actively stands up for her rights without violence or rage. Angelou also gains confidence and comes to terms with her identity. She becomes proud of her race and finds comfort in her own skin. In the second part of the paper, Angelou's rape is described, as well as the consequences of this event on her development as a young woman. The author speaks of her muteness and the guilt that followed her for years after the incident, but also of her healing and learning to express herself through words. In the last part of the paper, the final chapters of the book are interpreted. In these chapters, Angelou describes her quest for her sexual identity and her teenage pregnancy. These events are the last steps on her way to adulthood, womanhood, and motherhood.

**Keywords:** Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, racism, oppression, trauma, rape, self-discovery

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## Introduction

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the autobiography of Maya Angelou published in 1969. The narrative describes the author's early years, from the age of three to the age of sixteen. The most important topics in this coming-of-age story are the "process of affirming identity, learning about words, and resisting racism" (Walker 93). At the tender age of three, Marguerite Johnson<sup>1</sup> moves from California to a little town called Stamps in Arkansas, together with her older brother Bailey. Because their parents' marriage ended, the children were destined to go and live with their paternal grandmother Annie Henderson – "Momma." The children spend their days in the "Store," kept up by Momma and their Uncle Willie, in the black section of the town. Momma is the center figure and the moral compass in Angelou's life, and her brother is her pride and joy. Angelou spends her childhood oppressed by racism and her own thoughts of self-hatred. After spending her early years doing chores, reading books, and going on adventures, Angelou's father appears out of nowhere and takes her and Bailey to St. Louis. Their father, Big Bailey, leaves the children to live with their mother Vivian. When only eight years old, Angelou is raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. After an unjust conviction, Mr. Freeman is released and killed, presumably by her uncles. Angelou keeps carrying the shame and possible guilt after the rape and stops speaking to anyone except Bailey. After a while, her muteness starts frustrating her family and they decide to send the children back to Stamps. Later, Momma introduces her to Mrs. Flowers, a gentle and educated woman who starts teaching Angelou the ways how to express herself and regain her voice. In this period, she becomes aware of the weaknesses and strengths of her black community. She slowly but surely finds different ways to fight racist oppression by silently protesting against her white oppressors. At the age of fourteen, Angelou and Bailey move back in with their mother, who now lives in California. Vivian marries Daddy Clidell, who is the first father figure in Angelou's life. While spending her vacation with her biological father, Angelou gets stabbed by his jealous girlfriend Dolores and runs away to live in a junkyard with other teenagers. She then returns to live with her mother in San Francisco as a strong and confident woman. She defies all laws when she starts working as the town's first black female streetcar conductor at only fifteen years old. In the last chapter of her autobiography, Angelou explains how she got

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<sup>1</sup> Often referred to as Maya or Ritie, but in the further context referred to as Maya.

pregnant at the age of sixteen and hides her pregnancy from her family. She graduates from high school and becomes mother to a beautiful son.

This paper will focus on the issues of racial oppression and the protest against racism, but also on the topic of rape and the consequences of trauma at an early age. Beginning with the discussion of subtle resistance and active protest as the means of standing up to racial oppression, the paper continues by looking at the development of the main character through the painful years of her childhood and her search for confidence and identity. Lastly, the paper gives insight into the sexual assault on Maya Angelou and the aftermath of her trauma.

## **1. Racism and the Protest Against Racial Oppression**

Maya Angelou takes the inspiration for the title of her autobiography from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy." In his poem, the caged bird sings out of frustration – it is imprisoned, and its song becomes a prayer. Angelou sets her younger self in a similar situation: she is also a caged bird, imprisoned by self-hatred and racial oppression. Yet, she does not let the cage confine her: the cage becomes a vehicle for her self-realization. In her autobiography, Angelou describes how she adapted to her role as a young Black girl, as well as all the failures on the way to her realization of how to discover herself and be comfortable in her own skin (McMurry 106).

Historically, racism was based on the belief that the racially oppressed were not human beings. In response, African American authors wrote texts that proved the opposite, saying they were humans who did not deserve such a treatment. By producing Literature, African American authors tried to fight the beliefs in racial hierarchies, which classified them into second class citizens. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a typical representative of this viewpoint, being written to prove just how undeservingly Maya Angelou was placed into a lower category of society in her childhood, just based on her skin-color (Walker 93).

Maya Angelou designs *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a sequence of lessons that express her race and identity, but also lead the reader from "helpless rage and indignation" to "subtle resistance" and finally "outright active protest" against racial oppression (Walker 93). These lessons are shaped into short stories, which do not strictly follow the chronological order (Walker 94).

One of the most impactful stories occurs at the opening pages of the autobiography. It is an anecdote from Easter Sunday in Stamps. Maya<sup>2</sup> prepares for the celebration of Easter in her Church and for the poem recital. Momma prepared a lavender dress for her to wear. While watching Momma make the dress, Maya considers it the most beautiful thing she has ever seen and believes it has magical powers, thinking the dress will transform her into a white girl: “I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right with the world” (Angelou 2). Yet, on Easter morning, the depressing reality is revealed: “But Easter’s early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman’s once-was-purple throw-away” (Angelou 2). It does not hold any magic anymore and only shows that she lives in a “black dream” from which she cannot escape (Arensberg 278). While looking into the crowd in the church, Maya still thinks of herself as a white girl trapped in the wrong body. She imagines just how sorry would everyone be for mocking her if they knew the truth: “Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten?” (Angelou 2). She then mixes the elements of fairy tale into the story by imagining a cruel fairy stepmother who had changed her from a beautiful white girl into her present condition (McMurry 107). When she fails to recite her poem and the whole Church starts to laugh, Maya is overwhelmed with emotions and escapes the church “peeing and crying” (Arensberg 7). This story introduces Marguerite Johnson as an extremely self-conscious child at a young age. She confesses her racial self-hatred by believing that underneath the ugly dress, her skinny legs, broad feet, nappy hair, and the space between her teeth hides the real Marguerite Johnson – a sweet white girl with blond hair and blue eyes (McMurry 106). Maya completely separates herself from her race and falls into an identity crisis. She refuses to accept herself for who she is and searches for a foreign identity, which would be accepted in the white culture (Walker 97). By imagining a cruel fairy stepmother, Maya believes her identity depends on an outside force. If benevolent, the fairy will transform Maya into a white girl; but she remains cruel, and the spell remains unbroken. By acknowledging her own blackness, Maya must acknowledge the existence of an outside force that dictates her identity beyond her control (Arensberg 279). Another important detail is the way Maya describes her dress as sounding “like crepe paper on the back of hearses” (Angelou 2). It symbolically shows that Maya mourns the death of her white dream and her white body. Her black body becomes a hearse that not only carries her dead dream but also her existence, which is constantly threatened by

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of the plot retelling, the author Maya Angelou will be referred to as Maya.

white people (Arensberg 280). This opening scene presents Angelou's inability to control her appearance, words, bodily functions, and even thoughts and dreams. After the painful realization she is not a "sweet little white girl," Maya becomes embarrassed about her appearance and struggles to remember the words of her poem, leaving the church in tears (Vermillion 252). This episode could be described as the "epiphanic moment" of her youth. It presents us with the two main struggles in Angelou's early life: her blackness and her outcast position in her community (Arensberg 279). As McMurry explains, she "is in a cage which conceals and denies her true nature, and she is aware of her displacement" (107). Angelou concludes this story by saying: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" (4). She acknowledges how unnecessary this "white fantasy" is in her generally painful childhood, but she continues to fantasize about this unreachable dream.

In the later chapters, Angelou introduces the reader to her daily situations and people she is surrounded with. In some stories, she depicts the racial oppression and segregation in her town and brings us into her own thoughts, where it is visible what she thinks of the white race in general. Maya mentions the cotton pickers who would come to Momma's Store. She talks about their caged condition, being trapped in the cotton fields without the possibility to escape (McMurry 107): "But I had seen the fingers cut by the mean little cotton bolls, and I had witnessed the backs and shoulders and arms and legs resisting any further demands" (Angelou 8). Maya's community instilled the realistic fear of whites into her. Momma once said, she "didn't cotton to the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one's life" (39). This statement can be best explained by a short episode from the autobiography. A sheriff comes to the Store to warn Momma of "the boys" (the Klan) who might hurt Uncle Willie, just because a black man messed with a white lady. Angelou comments: "His confidence that my uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken dropping was too humiliating to hear" (18). This episode shows just how predatory the white world around them was and how humiliating it was for every Black man to fear for his life, even if he was innocent, just because of the color of his skin (Arensberg 282). Angelou later concludes that "the Black woman in the South who raises sons, grandsons and nephews had her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose" (95). Another instance of violence towards African Americans was when a black man was killed and thrown into a pond, just because he had had sex with a white woman. Later, Bailey finds himself near a pond where a body of a dead black man is found (it is not distinguished whether it is the afore-mentioned man or not). He is

in shock and starts to question why white people hate Black people so much. For the first time, Bailey is aware of the insecurity everyday life burdens him with. Angelou concludes this chapter by saying that Bailey

was away in a mystery, locked in the enigma that young Southern Black boys start to unravel, start to try to unravel, from seven years old to death. The humorless puzzle of inequality and hate. His experience raised the question of worth and values, of aggressive inferiority and aggressive arrogance. (198)

Angelou also explains how severe the segregation was in Stamps. When she talks about the Black area of Stamps, she idealizes it: she lives under the care of her family, knows all the Black people in town, people help each other (mostly financially), and find comfort in each other. She feels safe and at home there and leads a normal life. The community is religion-centered, and God connects them with one another (Gibson 128). Yet, when she talks about “whitefolksville,” Angelou compares herself with an explorer “walking without weapons into man-eating animals’ territory” (25). Most of the Black children have never seen white people and many do not believe they exist. They have been taught from a young age that white people are to be dreaded and avoided. Angelou refers to white people as “whitefolks” (26). Because of what has been instilled in her head, Maya cannot consider “whitefolks” to be human. The only humans are her friends and acquaintances, but not white people. The prejudice in her town goes to such an extent that Black people cannot buy vanilla ice cream and need to be satisfied with chocolate (Angelou 49). Even in such a situation, black people develop an admiration for everything that belongs to white people. Maya is most envious of their opportunity to waste things: “They had so many clothes they were able to give perfectly good dresses, worn just under the arms, to the sewing class at our school for the larger girls to practice on” (Angelou 49). On the other hand, every generous offer in the Black community has been preceded by some kind of sacrifice. Maya even believes that God is white, but not prejudiced (50), which would explain why white people have the right to live so lavishly while Black people silently observe. The reality of growing up as a Black child (especially a Black girl) in a white dominated society is that childhood and violence “go hand in hand” in such communities (Pastourmatzi 200).

Chapter five begins by Angelou explaining the basic rules of her household: “‘Thou shall not be dirty’ and ‘Thou shall not be impudent’” (27). A child who is impudent brought shame and destruction upon their family. She also adds that “everyone [she] knew respected these customary

laws, except for the powhitetrash children” (Angelou 28). With this statement, she begins to tell one of the crucial stories in the autobiography. The story takes place when Maya is ten years old. Momma is standing in front of the Store when some “powhitetrash” girls approach her. Maya hides inside, while Momma keeps standing on the porch humming a hymn (McMurry 108). The girls tease Momma, mimic, and insult her appearance and behavior. Maya observes the scene, filled with humiliation and anger. Momma does not move nor address the children. As the girls leave, Momma enters the Store with a radiant look on her face. At first, Maya is infuriated by the situation, feels humiliated and helpless, and wants to hurt the girls for disrespecting her grandmother. After Momma says a polite goodbye to the girls, Maya’s rage peaks. She cannot comprehend why her grandmother has respect for such children. When she finally looks into her grandmother’s face, she realizes that her grandmother had achieved something by not responding to the impudent children (Walker 95). Angelou also emphasizes the dirtiness of the children: “the dirt of the girls’ cotton dresses continued on their legs, feet, arms and faces to make them all of a piece” (31). On the other hand, Angelou and her grandmother serve as an example of cleanliness and order. At first glance, this fact cannot be connected to racism, but, with their actions, Angelou and Momma demonstrate that they are not impudent and dirty, unlike the “powhitetrash” girls (Walker 95). Their victory is resisting the attempts of the children to descend to their level by maintaining their dignity and remaining clean and polite (Walker 95-96). Momma triumphs over the white girls by respecting the disrespectful children (McMurry 108). This act will not end segregation in Stamps, but after this episode, there is a sense of racial pride both in Maya and her grandmother. They also demonstrate that racism can be effectively fought by subtle resistance, and not only by rage and violence (Walker 96).

In chapter sixteen, Maya’s response to racial oppression progresses even further. She is employed as Mrs. Cullinan’s helper. When Mrs. Cullinan, a rich white lady, continuously neglects Maya’s name and keeps calling her Mary, Maya decides to express her emotions by smashing Mrs. Cullinan’s favorite dishes. This occurs because, as Angelou explains, “[e]very person I knew had a hellish horror of being ‘called out of his name.’ It was dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks” (109). She takes matters into her own hands and decides to reclaim her own identity (Walker 99). By doing this, Angelou does not feel humiliated anymore, and shows she has learned her lesson after the “powhitetrash” episode. She resists the subtle

demeaning of her employer, not by openly confronting her oppressor or allowing the continuation of this situation, but by subtle resistance (Walker 99).

The eighteenth and nineteenth chapters tell stories of two events: a revival meeting and the Joe Louis fight. In both chapters, the black community shares a sense of superiority over whites, even though it is short lived and fragile (Walker 100). At the revival, the sermon reminds the congregation of the charity they need to carry with them and of the ultimate reward they will receive, but also accuses the whites of lacking that same charity. Maya leaves the revival feeling better about the treatment her community receives on this earth because of the treatment they believe they would receive in the eternity:

It was better to be meek and lowly, spat upon and abused for this little time than to spend eternity frying in the fires of hell. No one would have admitted that the Christian and charitable people were happy to think of their oppressors' turning forever on the Devil's spit over the flames of fire and brimstone. (Angelou 131)

The congregation shares a sense of superiority without open confrontation and violence (Walker 100). In the next chapter, the community is following a boxing match between Joe Louis, a black man, and a white man. The whole black race awaits the victory of Louis because otherwise: “[they] were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that [they] were lower types of human beings” (Angelou 135). His final victory fills his fans with racial pride: “Champion of the world. A Black boy. Some Black mother's son. He was the strongest man in the world” (Angelou 136). His victory is also a spiritual victory for his whole race (McMurry 110). After a moment of superiority and pride, the community realizes how inferior they actually are. Angelou mentions that everybody who was out of town needed to spend the night in Stamps because it would be dangerous for a black man to walk the road on the night when it was proven that black people “were the strongest people in the world” (136). Whereas some of the previous chapters end on a positive note, this chapter leaves a taste of defeat (Walker 100).

Chapter twenty-three presents the key moment in Maya's change of thought regarding her racial identity. Angelou describes a scene from her graduation: a white speaker insults the black audience by mentioning the improvements to be made in the white school. After the initial humiliation and anger, Maya senses that the whole generation feels the same way. Then a member of the black community lifts the spirits of students by singing a traditional African American song (Walker 101).

This time the feeling of racial self-hatred is shared by the whole community. The speech destroys all the black children's dreams on the happiest day of their childhood: "The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gaugins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises" (Angelou 179). They could not decide upon their own destiny like the white children because of the lack of opportunities the white world offered them. The best they could do was to be another famous athlete. Angelou describes this miserable situation by saying: "It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense" (180). She also recognizes her gender as a part of the problem on the way to success ("the girls weren't even in on it") even though her race presents a greater limitation in this situation (Stewart Brush 130). A member of the community then changes the atmosphere by performing a famous traditional song. By doing this, he confronts the white oppressor without violence and permits his community to feel their pride and dignity again (Walker 101). This was the first time Angelou has actually listened to the words of the song and felt racial pride: "I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race" (184). The primary difference in this chapter, unlike in the previous ones, is the resistance of the community and not only of the individual. It is not yet an open confrontation, but it paves the way towards the protest that will happen in the later chapters.

Chapter twenty-four tells a story of a white dentist in Stamps who refuses to treat Maya's toothache because of her skin color although Momma previously lent him money as a favor. After Momma enters his office to talk, Maya imagines her as a superwoman who threatens the trembling dentist. In the end, Maya and Momma leave in search of another dentist, leaving Maya's fantasies unfulfilled. This fantasy scene is the only such scene in the autobiography. Critics believe it has been written to demonstrate just how limited Momma is in fighting racism (Walker 102). In later chapters, Maya and her family live in San Francisco. Momma is expected to assimilate into the new society, filled with "white landlords, Mexican neighbors and Negro strangers" (Angelou 202). At that time, Maya "perceived [herself] as a part of something" (Angelou 211) for the first time, without identifying with any specific ethnic group. She is one of three Black students in her new school, which makes her appreciate her people more. She also compares her education with the education of her white schoolmates. In school, they all follow the same curriculum, but in their homes the Black students have more rules to learn:



In the classroom we all learned past participles, but in the streets and in our homes the Blacks learned to drop s's from plurals and suffixes from past-tense verbs. We were alert to the gap separating the written word from the colloquial. We learned to slide out of one language and into another without being conscious of the effort. At school, in a given situation, we might respond with "That's not unusual." But in the street, meeting the same situation, we easily said, "It be's like that sometimes." (Angelou 225)

This shows their adaptability to any circumstance, which their white colleagues lack. As Walker explains it: "the blacks learn all the whites do and more" (104). During her vacation, Maya visits Mexico with her father. After a turbulent night, Maya maneuvers her drunken father's car down a mountain. When she reaches the border without any significant damage, she realizes just how skillful she is (Koyana and Gray 90). Back at her father's home, Maya confronts her father's girlfriend and gets stabbed, so she decides to leave his home and live on her own. She joins a group of outcast children at a junkyard, where she lives independently for a month. She learns to drive and curse, but most importantly, becomes accepting of all races: "The lack of criticism evidenced by [their] ad hoc community influenced [her], and set a tone of tolerance for [her] life" (Angelou 254). This experience marks the beginning of a new era of racial tolerance combined with a strong sense of independence (Koyana and Gray 90).

At the age of fifteen, Maya is again living with her mother Vivian in San Francisco. She wants to find a job and immediately thinks of becoming a streetcar "conductorette." Her mother warns her that black people cannot do such a job, but Maya is determined to become the first black conductorette on the San Francisco streetcar. Even after the white secretary repeatedly declines her attempts for a job interview, she does not withdraw: "I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BE A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHARGER FROM MY BELT" (Angelou 268). This sentence demonstrates the growth of her self-esteem through the years (Koyana and Gray 90). Maya comes to the realization that the only reason she cannot be hired is the fact that she is black. The fight against white oppression reaches its climax, moving from subtle resistance to active protest: Maya is persistent in her attempts to break the color line of the San Francisco streetcar company (Walker 101). After many frequent visits to their office, Maya gets officially hired. By being persistent and getting the job, Maya wins the battle for her civil rights but also for her own personal self-worth. In this moment, her self-image and racial identity finally connect (Walker 97). This personal victory shows black people in a different light: not as victims of oppression for once, but as carriers of

resistance against racism. In the words of Suzette Henke: “If discrimination can be overcome by the patient self-assertion of a lone, determined teenager, what might racial solidarity and communal black struggle for empowerment not achieve?” (qtd. in Koyana and Gray 90). When the school year begins, Maya resumes with her education, much wiser, older, and more independent than before. Feeling different from her schoolmates, Angelou concludes that: “the things [she] had yet to learn wouldn’t be taught to [her] at George Washington High School” (271). All the important life lessons are to be learned outside the classroom, in the real world.

Despite the burdens all the Black women carry, combined with the “masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power” (Angelou 272), they have shown countless times they could be survivors and develop positive personal and racial identities (Weixlmann 389). As Angelou herself concludes: “The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence” (272). Constrained by many confines, the ability to succeed makes women like Maya Angelou the representatives of black heroism and the autobiographies like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* good examples of a typical success story. Being “offered only the crumbs from [her] country’s table” (Angelou 225) – suffering from an identity crisis and being constantly humiliated by racist insults, by the end of the autobiography Angelou gets to know who she is, the ways to respond to racism and not to feel inferior, but also to keep her purity, dignity, and liberty (Walker 104). Many critics believe that Angelou’s basic motive for writing her autobiography was to be “understood, accepted, and loved” (Arensberg 277).

## **2. Trauma and the Consequences of Rape**

The other crucial factor in Angelou’s early development is the sexual violation that happened when she was only eight years old. At the time, Maya and her brother Bailey were living in St. Louis with their mother Vivian Baxter and her side of the family. Maya introduces the reader to Mr. Freeman, her mother’s lover, with whom they lived for a period of time. Because their mother worked as a nurse, the children were often left to take care of themselves. They enjoyed reading, but they also experienced nightmares because of the lurid tales they would read before bed. For that reason, Maya would often sleep with her mother and Mr. Freeman. She explains this strange situation: “Because of a need for stability, children easily become creatures of habit. After the third time in Mother’s bed, I

thought there was nothing strange about sleeping there” (Angelou 72). One morning, as Vivian leaves early for work, Maya gets suddenly awakened by Mr. Freeman and instantly becomes aware of what is happening. She remembers what Momma taught her: “Keep your legs closed, and don’t let nobody see your pocketbook” (Angelou 73). Mr. Freeman assures her that he will not hurt her. He pleases himself while being on top of Maya and then holds her and comforts her. She describes the feeling as enjoyable, hoping it would never end. Yet, the moment soon comes to an end and Mr. Freeman threatens that he would kill Bailey if anyone found out what happened that morning. Maya is confused, not knowing what actually happened and why it was wrong.

After that episode, Mr. Freeman becomes cold and distant, while Maya dreams of his affection towards her and struggles to keep the secret from Bailey. Once, in a desperate need of physical closeness, Maya sits on Mr. Freeman’s lap and tries to cuddle with him. He again uses the chance to subtly pleasure himself. Months later, Mr. Freeman and Maya are alone in the house. As she tries to leave to go to the library, Mr. Freeman violently rapes her in the middle of the living room. Maya describes the painful encounter as a near death experience. After the violation, Maya leaves to visit the library and ends up wandering the streets of St. Louis. As she comes home, she feels sick and cannot leave her bed. Her whole physical and emotional being is falling apart. After the whole night of arguing, Vivian leaves Mr. Freeman and he leaves the home for good. Maya is still scared for her brother’s and her own life. After her mother finds her bloody underwear, Maya is rushed to the hospital. There, she tells her family the truth and who violated her. At the trial, Maya is questioned about the rape. Because she is scared her family would disown her, she lies and tells the judge that Mr. Freeman never touched her before the incident. Mr. Freeman is sentenced to one year and one day of prison, but he is released after spending just a day in prison. Later that same day, he is killed, presumably by Maya’s uncles.

The act of rape can be observed as a consequence of the Baxter<sup>3</sup> family’s aggression and neglect. Mr. Freeman is Vivian’s lover, and she takes the full advantage of his adoration. Maya has mixed emotions about this relationship. She thinks he is lucky that Vivian chose him, but also feels sorry for him. Maya and Mr. Freeman are equally neglected by Vivian. Therefore, the rape of her daughter can be explained as a revenge against the mother, but also as an easy access to the child who is desperate for attention and closeness (Arensberg 284). Angelou describes Mr. Freeman’s physical

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<sup>3</sup> Vivian's family.

attention after the first sexual assault as comforting and loving: “He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn’t ever let me go. I felt at home” (73). She is convinced that Mr. Freeman is her real father. By never having experienced the real father-daughter bond, she cannot differentiate between lust and love. Freeman becomes her representative of physical love, which she lacks in her family life (Arensberg 285). For the first time in her young life, Maya’s world included “physical contact” (Angelou 75). In the black communities, the sexual predator usually came from the white race, but in this case, he comes from the black community and is the man closest with the child at the given moment (Pastourmatzi 208). When Maya’s attempt to retreat from being raped fails, she gets threatened by her molester: “If you scream, I’m gonna kill you. And if you tell, I’m gonna kill Bailey” (Angelou 78). At that moment, being held too tightly, she becomes a “defenseless prey” (Pastourmatzi 208). At the moment of penetration, her childhood is stolen from Maya, her body left on fire, and her mind in shock. Because she needs to hide the truth from her family, she becomes the accomplice of a crime (Pastourmatzi 210). During and after the violation, Maya’s love of literature keeps her sane. While the most painful part of her sexual assault takes place, Maya is “sure any minute [her] mother or Bailey or the Green Hornet would burst in the door and save [her]” (Angelou 78). After being raped, she rushes to the library, trying to comprehend what happened (Arensberg 275).

In the court, Maya wrongly testifies in favor of Mr. Freeman, concealing that she was violated even before the last incident. By lying, she begins to feel immense guilt and starts despising Mr. Freeman for making her lie (Pastourmatzi 210). Initially, she is terrified that, if she tells the truth, Mr. Freeman will kill her family, but in the court, that fear is focused more on herself than on other people. As Danahay explains, “Angelou feels forced by the weight of the expectations of the courtroom audience to lie about her relationship with the attacker” (68). Because Maya is convinced that she helped Mr. Freeman commit this crime, she also believes that: “[her] uncles would kill [her] and Grandmother Baxter would stop speaking, as she often did when she was angry... And Mother, who thought [she] was such a good girl, would be so disappointed. But most important, there was Bailey. [She] had kept a big secret from him” (Angelou 85). By lying in the court, she wants to make sure that her family would not lose their image of her as a sweet, innocent girl.

After hearing about Freeman’s subsequent murder, Maya is overwhelmed by guilt (Arensberg 285). Because she has given a false testimony in the court, a man is now dead. At that moment, she

identifies her speech with violence, lies, and murder and decides to stop talking to anyone except Bailey (Danahay 68). She explains this decision by saying:

Instinctively, or somehow, I knew that because I loved [Bailey] so much I'd never hurt him, but if I talked to anyone else that person might die too. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended. (Angelou 87)

Fearing that her words are fatal for the people around her, she refuses to speak (Walker 97). She becomes somewhat of a bearer of death and violence and a disgrace of God. Combined with her well-established inferiority complex and self-rejection, Maya also develops a sense of repulsiveness, which, in her opinion, everyone except Bailey feels towards her (Arensberg 285). She starts perceiving her body as a "Pandora's Box," which will destroy everything around her if left uncontrolled (Arensberg 286): "I could feel the evilness flowing through my body and waiting, pent up, to rush off my tongue if I tried to open my mouth. I clamped my teeth shut, I'd hold it in. If it escaped, wouldn't it flood the world and all the innocent people?" (Angelou 87).

Many experts explain that the posttraumatic stress caused by a violent act can flood a child with many negative emotions. Fear combined with threats can prolong the vulnerability of a child (Pastourmatzi 209). In Angelou's case, the fearful response to violence was silence, which was partly externally imposed by Mr. Freeman's threats and partly by Angelou herself (Pastourmatzi 210). As Maya Angelou herself argues: "The young girl today is no less made to feel guilty or feels no less guilty than I did 40 years ago. And I know, I know too well, that the girls feel as much involved in the crime as the criminal" (qtd. in Pastourmatzi 211). Angelou does not feel entirely as a victim, but as a source of violence that enabled Mr. Freeman to sexually abuse her (Danahay 69).

Maya also explains her family's response to her silence: "In the first weeks my family accepted my behavior as a post-rape, post-hospital affliction... They understood that I could talk to Bailey, but no one else" (Angelou 88). Yet, after the doctor said Maya is healed, she is called impudent by her family for not speaking to them: "[f]or a while I was punished for being so uppity that I wouldn't speak; and then came the thrashings, given by any relative who felt himself offended" (Angelou 88). This response to her muteness is another form of violence in Maya's family (Arensberg 284). Her fear of abandonment comes true as she is banished back to Stamps (Arensberg 281) because her family in St. Louis got fed up with her "grim presence" and decided to send the "constantly morose child" back to where she belongs (Angelou 88).

Upon her return to Stamps, Maya enjoys the town's inertness. She feels that this is exactly what she needs to heal. The people in town do not know about the events that took place in St. Louis and they accept Maya and her muteness as "a natural outgrowth of a reluctant return to the South" (Angelou 92). For many years, as "an outcast in a community of outcasts" (Arensberg 286), Maya has no intimate friends of her age and avoids emotional ties with others. Momma then introduces her to Mrs. Flowers, a literate and educated woman whom Angelou describes as the "aristocrat of Black Stamps" (93). She helps Maya regain her voice by giving her assignments, such as reciting poetry aloud and reading books. Mrs. Flowers also helps Maya gain self-confidence, and by doing so, contributes to her identity affirmation (Walker 96): "I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson" (Angelou 101). This respect and affection have a positive effect on Angelou during her suffering from the self-hatred and guilt following her rape (Walker 96). Mrs. Flowers also "lays the groundwork" for Angelou's later appreciation of poetry and art by starting their first lesson with a conversation about the power of words, trying to convince her to use her voice again for something powerful (Walker 98). Maya also admires how gracefully Mrs. Flowers rules her words and her body, making her seem almost supernatural (Vermillion 252): "She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her" (Angelou 93). By being herself, Mrs. Flowers "made [Maya] proud to be Negro" (Angelou 95). For the first time in her autobiography, Maya admires a Black woman and praises her appearance and behavior. The positive effects of Mrs. Flowers and the attention she gives Maya are obvious, especially when it comes to her insecurities and her identity crisis (Walker 96).

### **3. Self - Discovery and Motherhood**

Chapter thirty-five explains Angelou's failure to acknowledge the changes happening to her adolescent body. Without any form of sexual education, Angelou searches for answers about puberty in literature. She is reading a book called *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall. It is her first introduction to lesbianism and what she considers "pornography" (Angelou 273). She calls lesbians "woman lovers" and learns that they are usually "disowned by their families, snubbed by their friends and ostracized from every society" (Angelou 273) because of their condition, which they could not

control. As she does not develop as other girls her age do, nor has any characteristics of a sixteen-year-old woman, Maya believes she is becoming a lesbian. This thought can also be connected with her fear of men and her own sexuality in general, which is the aftermath of her rape. When she confronts her mother Vivian with this idea, Angelou demonstrates her own “inability of the verbal to explain the physical” (Vermillion 254). Vivian suggests Maya to read some dictionary definitions regarding sexuality and human body, and Maya feels uncomfortable and embarrassed to do what her mother asked. Unlike the poetry she usually enjoys, these words do not have a soothing power. After seeing the breasts of one of her girlfriends, Maya is left amazed. For the first time, her attention shifts from words to bodies. This episode paves the way for her celebration of black bodies; especially female bodies (Vermillion 254). She is not interested in touching a woman, but rather wants to be a woman, even though that seems like an unreachable dream (Angelou 280). She decides to find a boyfriend, which would “clarify [her] position to the world and, even more important, to [herself]” (Angelou 280), or simply put, affirm her heterosexuality (Pastourmatzi 208). While seeking physical reassurance in her sexuality, Maya has sex with one of “the most eligible young men in her neighborhood” (Angelou 281). Maya explains that she had anticipated “long soulful tongued kisses and gentle caresses” (282), but instead, she experiences neither romance nor physical attraction.

Because of the lack of sexual education, this sexual encounter leaves Maya pregnant at the age of sixteen. The boy, who is the father of the baby, stops talking to Maya when she is four months pregnant, and she is left alone. Bailey, who is now overseas, advises Maya to graduate high school and later tell her parents about the pregnancy because, otherwise, Vivian would make Maya quit her education. Her unplanned pregnancy becomes the reflection of the society’s negative outlook on sexuality (Koyana and Gray 94), but it would be wrong to conclude that this is a tragic ending to the story. Despite her initial pain and confusion, Angelou places a greater emphasis on the autonomy she has received. She reclaims her body and volition after many painful years of being a victim (Vermillion 255). The pregnancy is the consequence of her awakening sexual appetite and the desire to explore her sexuality (Koyana and Gray 94). Maya needs to cope with isolation while pregnant, because none of her family members know about her condition. During this period, she learns to accept her body and feels her autonomy increasing (Vermillion 255). She accepts the responsibility for her own pregnancy: “I had to face the fact that I had brought my new catastrophe upon myself” (Angelou 284). Maya also does not place the blame or responsibility on the father of the child: “How was I to blame the innocent man whom I had lured into making love to me?” (Angelou 284). After

graduating from high school, Maya reveals to her mother Vivian and her husband Daddy Clidell (whom Maya considers to be the first father figure in her life) that she is pregnant. At that moment, Maya has been more than eight months pregnant. She cannot comprehend that neither of her parents realized the truth, and she is even more surprised that she has carried out her whole pregnancy on her own. This is the ultimate measure of her growing independence: Maya is able to decide about her life herself, but also to deal with the consequences of her decisions (Koyana and Gray 94).

After eight months and one week, without too much pain, Maya's son is born. When looking at her newborn baby, Maya develops a greater acceptance of her own body and its powers (Vermillion 255): "I had a baby. He was beautiful and mine. Totally mine. No one had bought him for me. No one had helped me endure the sickly gray months. I had had help in the child's conception, but no one could deny that I had had an immaculate pregnancy" (Angelou 288). By using the word "immaculate," Maya shifts her perception of her own body from being "dirty like mud" (2) to it being almost perfect (Vermillion 255). With this statement, she also challenges the racist stereotypes that normally associate a black woman's body with illicit sexuality (Vermillion 255), but also shifts her perspective from a used and damaged girl to a woman who is in charge of her own body. Maya also begins to see a lot of her mother's power and beauty in herself because she envisions her mother as looking like "Virgin Mary" (Angelou 68), who is immaculate in every sense of the word.

Maya's insecurity returns for a moment in the final paragraphs of her autobiography. Her mother suggests that Maya should sleep next to her son but she refuses, being worried that she would crush the baby due to her clumsiness. After Maya wakes up, Vivian shows her how she unconsciously protected her baby during the night by making him a tent out of a blanket. This scene of the mother-child bond is the closing scene of the autobiography and represents Maya's newfound autonomy to take care of her child. It is the harmonious union of her body and her will (Vermillion 256). Vivian's support and determination to nurture her grandson is the confirmation of strong bonds that black families share and could be seen as a proof that, after centuries of illegitimate children conceived by rape, black Americans have developed more compassion towards each other. Many unwed young mothers are usually rejected and banished by their families and relatives. In Maya's case, the love and support of her mother helps her cope with her transition from an insecure child to a confident mother (Koyana and Gray 95).



In patriarchal cultures, a woman is defined by her body and her sexual status. A rape victim is forced to construct an alternate self, which is not based upon her sexual violation or the unwanted “damaging” of her body. These women often fragment their identity in the quest to perceive themselves as whole and untouched by excluding their body from the rest of their identity. They try to convince themselves that only their body was there during the sexual assault, but not *them*. This phenomenon is called “somatophobia” – a fear of and disdain for the body. Maya Angelou, as a woman who recorded her own rape by describing it in her autobiography, reclaims her body and closes the distance between what society considers her to be and what she truly is (Vermillion 243). She celebrates her body and new motherhood as a symbol of victory over her previous struggles (Vermillion 250).

## **Conclusion**

Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* deals with the self-discovery and the development of the main character, Maya Angelou, beginning in her childhood and ending in her early adolescence. Living in an underdeveloped community chained by racial oppression, Angelou bases her identity on racial self-hatred and insecurities about her body and her personality. By following her grandmother's example, Angelou learns the patterns of resistance to racism and racial prejudice. She observes her grandmother in her silent protest against impudent white children and learns the power of her race. When she is constantly humiliated by her employer, Angelou uses her previous knowledge and resists the demeaning through subtle resistance. Through many gatherings of her community, she acknowledges the power of her people and feels racial pride, but also realizes how limited their power is. At her graduation, after the initial humiliation, Angelou experiences the resistance of her whole generation against the white speaker and feels proud to be African American for the first time in the autobiography. After being denied treatment at a local dentist because of her skin color, Angelou imagines her grandmother as a superhero who will fight her way until she reaches success. In this episode, we learn about the weakness of the Black race. The final instance of protest against oppression is Angelou's fight for the job as a conductorette. In this chapter, Angelou shows her power and confidence and reaches her desired dreams, proving that persistence can win even over racial prejudice. By the end of the autobiography, she goes from an insecure child

to a confident young woman who is aware of herself and her own powers but also keeps her dignity and purity through her battles. Another important factor in Angelou's early life is her rape. After being sexually violated by her stepfather and after his death in the hands of her uncles, Angelou fears to speak and becomes mute. She is afraid that her words will cause the deaths of everyone she loves. After many lessons with Mrs. Flowers, she learns the power of words and uses them to explore the world. In her teenage years, as a consequence of her rape Angelou has doubts about her sexual identity. In her search for answers, she gets pregnant. Almost nine months later, after being isolated and alone, Angelou gives birth to her son. In the end, she transitions into a strong young mother and reclaims her body after many years of being a victim. Her newfound confidence and motherhood serve as the symbols of victory in her battle with her previous pain and insecurity.

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