

The Element of Racism on the Blacks in the Novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract: *Maya Angelou is one of the great writers of modern age Afro-American Literature. In her seven autobiographical fictions very boldly and honestly she has talked about the evil effects of Racism on Afro-American community. There are some instances in which black people's lives were depicted as lesser than animals, that they were subjected to discrimination of White people just because of their colour. Maya Angelou has described in great detail about Racism, as a child how it was hard to cope up with Racism and live her life, and how constantly they had to live in nightmares and how white people were indifferent and inhuman to them.*

Keywords: Racism, Black people, Afro-American, Maya Angelou, Inhuman.

Maya Angelou was an American poet, memoirist, and one of the great civil rights activist. She has published seven wonderful autobiographies, three books of essays, several book of poetry, and is credited with a list of plays, television shows, and movies over the span of 50 years. Maya Angelou's real name is Marguerite Johnson; she was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri.

Her father, Bailey Johnson, was a doorkeeper and naval dietician; her mother, Vivian Baxter, was a nurse and realtor. Maya Angelou's family first lived in Missouri, Arkansas, and then later onwards in California during her childhood. Maya Angelou had a very disturbed and difficult childhood, when Maya Angelou and her brother were very young their parents got divorced and later onwards she and her brother Bailey were sent to Stamps, Arkansas to live with their parental grandmother.

Neighbourhood or the society of Stamps was too difficult since they were living in the area of segregated Jim Crow law. It was difficult for Maya Angelou to cope up with the prejudiced society; being a Black was already hard enough and on top of that she was girl, so she had bitter experiences as a Black child in her early days of childhood.

While living with her family Maya Angelou attended public schools and studied music, dance, and drama privately. Later on in her life around 1954 to 1955 she was part of a musical tour called as Porgy and Bess which was promoted by U. S. Department of State.

Maya Angelou was very interested in acting career, she wanted to mark her place in theatre so she decided to move to New York and she also had the chance of performing in several off-Broadway plays including *Calypso Heatwave* in 1957 and *The Blacks* in 1960. Also in 1960, she explains in her novel *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* about how she got the job as an assistant administrator in the School of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana in Africa. Maya Angelou had an amazing opportunity to teach and perform in several plays at the University of Ghana before returning to the U. S. in 1966.

In the year 1970, Maya Angelou published her first book and very famous autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird*

Sings, which focuses on her struggles as a young Afro-American woman and her difficult early childhood and how she stopped talking almost five years in her early childhood and how she grown to be an independent woman through her formative years and concludes with the birth of her son, Guy, in 1945. Not only just writing, Maya Angelou also continued to produce, direct, and act in stage productions.

In 1974 she directed the film *All Day Long* and, in 1988, directed the film *Down in the Delta*. Maya Angelou had been invited by several universities for the teaching position and she had been a teaching faculty of so many universities, some of them were University of California and the University of Kansas and Wake Forest University. Maya Angelou was awarded more than 50 honorary degrees, from Smith College, Mills College, Lawrence University, and Wake Forest University so many more. Maya Angelou was also nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for her first collection of poems *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971), she was also nominated for a Tony Award for best supporting actress in a 1977 production of *Roots*, and she was also nominated for North Carolina Award in Literature in 1992.

In 1993 Maya Angelou had the privilege to perform a reading of her poem "*On the Pulse of Morning*" at the inauguration of U. S. President Bill Clinton. Maya Angelou is hailed as one of the great voices of contemporary African American Literature, Maya Angelou is best known for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), the first of seven autobiographical books. Maya Angelou's literary works have generated a huge critical and popular interest in part because they depict her triumph over formidable social obstacles like racism gender disparity and other social discrimination and her fight to achieve a true sense of identity and self-acceptance. Such themes and elements tie Maya Angelou's writings very closely to the concerns of the feminist literary movement.

Maya Angelou has also been admired for her vivid portrayals of the strong and bold women in her life—notably her grandmother Annie Henderson, who raised her when she was a child and left to her care, another strong woman Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a virtuous black woman who helped Maya Angelou recover her speech, and Maya Angelou's mother,

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an independent individual Vivian Baxter. Critics have lauded Maya Angelou's dynamic prose style, heartrending humour, and brilliance of African American history and consciousness and bold narrative through her portrayal of personal experiences.

Racism is nothing but systematic oppression of one community by another community in the name of colour creed, and having the belief that one race is superior to the other races, and looking at some other races with prejudiced notion and treating them as inferior. The impact of Racism is so bad that thousands of families are suffering from so many social, economic, and political hindrance and not having a proper representation to represent themselves and their voice is not being heard.

So many people are living in dire condition, their families are scattered because of having no security of whatsoever. Black people are so desperate to hang on to their life, that they are ready to do anything, to provide for their family, so to do that they have been engaged into violent activities since they don't have any really possibility of equality as any other person to get a job or an education for life support without other persons prejudiced mind.

When somebody's life is so badly effected like this negatively in their own home country, it's hard to breath freely forget about living the life, this is the impact of Racism which is ongoing in the life of American Black people. Racism has made Black people's lives very trivial, so many uncountable people have been killed in the name crime without even a due process.

Recently in the year of 2020 on may 25 a Black American named as George Floyd was brutally killed by a police officer because he was black and the officer was so racist, he didn't care for the due process of enquiry of supposed suspect, he just man handled George Floyd as if like he was some kind of an animal and not a human being. Such is the impact Racism in everyday life of a Black person in America. Once James Baldwin said 'It is certain in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have'.

The reasons of creating of Racism is very clear, Racism was systematically founded so that the White supremacists can benefit their own countries and their needs, predominantly Racism started with Slavery, which makes sense that for chief labour and to gain control over a mass population of hard workers, Racism was used as a weapon by western countries. It started with African people being sold as slaves to these western masters for their planation works and other needs.

According to history of slavery and Racism it has been known that European investors found out that in order to gain wealth they can use slavery as an explanation for their barbaric treatment of other people, by saying that slaves are less than humans especially black coloured people and they have every right to treat them as animals.

Some people they even gone to the extent of scientifically justifying the racism with superstitious assumptions and

using some discredited methods, but recently scientific racism is known as junk science. One more crazy reason for Racism is, the assumption that Black people are naturally violent and dangerous, and the brutality has to be shown to keep the peace, these kind of inhuman assumptions paves the way for racism.

So many other reasons like Discriminatory policies, and good people not challenging Racism and ignoring it, Media representation of Black people, living in a same echo chamber meaning if somebody lives in an area or a family who has racist beliefs it is likely that the other people too will follow the path of racism and present themselves as the racist, other reasons like failing to recognize racism in one's own selves, and making quick judgments about Black people and their behaviour and simply casting the blame on oppressed community for everything. These are some of the major reason why Racism still pervades in 21th century.

It's so disheartening to know about American Apartheid it talks about how the Black ghetto was created by whites in the first half of the 20th century just so that they can isolate these growing beautiful urban Black population. Look how vicious it is, hard to imagine any humanity to be present in those times, and the result of that there are so many Black ghettos in America which doesn't have the basic commodities and facilities just because they are Black.

Even though some of the prospered Black families which have enough social economic strength to live in a better place, they are denied of that opportunity and they are being systematically limited to their own ghettos. Jim Crow law was the seed of this American apartheid condition, which began in early 1870s. Even though it has been officially ruled out in the year 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson when he signed Civil Rights Act, it did put an end to this official segregation, but still some part of America consist of these ghettos of Black people.

Racism is the by-product of Slavery, it has centuries of history, it has started way back in the early years of American settlements and even to this day, this issue is burning and far from over. Maya Angelou in her early childhood she had to travel to Stamps Arkansas with her little big brother to live with her grandmother whom she called as (Momma). At that time south was full of Racism and vey spiteful of black people.

Maya Angelou gives numerous accounts of Racism in this novel, one day a White lady was troubled by a Black guy, when this happened the White people made whole Black neighbourhood as their target to attack, to Black people's surprise the Sheriff of the town, comes to Maya Angelou's grandmother's house, and warns them about the attack of white people.

The whole family was so scared that they hid their uncle in the vegetable storage cabin which was owned by Maya Angelou's grandmother Annie Henderson, so that he will be safe when these white people attack the Black neighbourhood. Such was the predicament of Black people in south of the America in that time, even though Blacks

haven't made any mistake still they were subjected to be killed or tortured by white people.

This is so disheartening living your life in your country as a second-class citizens and holding onto your breath dearly on every single day, it's highly impossible to even comprehend this difficult situation, for so many black family were sacrificed on the name of colour, humanity should be the pillar of existence but colour was and still is to some extent the pillar of people's existence in America.

This incident was just a cog in the machine of Racism. When Maya was child she had a teeth pain she had to see the doctor very urgently that her pain was so grave. But in those days it was prohibited for a black person to get the treatment from a White doctor, but her grandmother had helped certain doctor of Arkansas so she decided to visit the doctor, so that Maya Angelou would get the treatment.

When they entered the white society people started to stare at them as if like they have done some kind of a mistake of coming there, as if like they were some sort of aliens to that habitat, this was so gruesome that anybody can feel the disgust of those malignant white people who were not mature enough to respect the humanity.

When they reached the hospital of that white doctor, Maya Angelou's grandmother knocked on the door the nurse opened up the door and she was aghast to see the black person standing in front of the door, imagine how offensive that expression might have been for Maya Angelou's grandmother and also to Maya Angelou as a patient.

The doctor comes out and accuses Maya Angelou's grandmother as if she has committed a great crime of coming there for the treatment, and tells her that, "Annie, (grandmother of Maya Angelou) my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's." (Angelou, 203). This was the situation for the most of the Black people, humiliated by White people and denied of their basic rights, so cruel was that, their living was questioned all the time. Later Maya Angelou's grandmother puts him in his right position, so powerful she was, she made him leave the city and made sure that he never practiced the medicine ever again.

Sometime it makes us wonder why so much of hatredness for this wonderful human race of Black people? Who had given so much to that nation, they had contributed in music, literature, and basically they built that nation as plantation slaves, what is their mistake? It is just the colour of their skin. They have the same anatomy of every single human on this planet, it's a serious condition where Black people strive for their everyday comfort not luxury just for the comfort. Before the end of the novel Maya Angelou gives us an account of an incident, which involves her brother Baily Johnson, one day he doesn't come home on the stipulated time he was supposed to come.

Grandmother Annie and Maya Angelou started worrying so they decided to look out for him. After a couple of minutes they saw him going towards the house and where upon reaching the house they enquired him about his whereabouts

he was so shaken that she (Grandmother Annie) could not make his words come out of his mouth. He had to be consoled and then he talked about an incident which took place in his presence that a Black guy was brutally murdered and his genitals were cut off and were put for show.

When he saw all of this Bailey junior was shaken to the core he could not be the same person after that. Imagine a child going through all of this trauma, what might have happened to him or his mental psyche? It's very scary to imagine oneself being in their situation in that particular moment, when he disclosed this matter to his grandmother, she decided that it was time for both Maya Angelou and Bailey junior to leave Stamps Arkansas especially for this Black boy living in that particular times into the south side of the country.

As a young girl Maya Angelou had to go through so much of humiliations at the hands of White girls of her age, to some extent that made her loose her confidence, and made her think of herself as insignificant. But she always found a way to fight back, and being the daughter of strong woman called as Vivian Baxter and she was the granddaughter of very pious and religious woman called as Annie Henderson, both of them shaped her life and taught her to be courageous no matter what happens in life.

Despite of all these troubles and all of these insecurities she felt and saw in her early days as a child, she never was a weak person she grew more and more strong, the more obstacles she had in her life the better she became, Barack Obama called 'Maya Angelou as A truly phenomenal woman' but it took a lot of strength to hold onto her life, not every black person has that gift of holding onto their life very boldly.

She is an inspiration for millions of people all around the world she showed the right path to Black people to live above of all these difficulties while they stand their ground and fight for what's theirs rightfully. James Baldwin a great renowned writer of Afro-American literature has opined about Maya Angelou's novel that 'I know that not since of my childhood, when people in books were more real than the people one saw every day, have I found myself so moved'.

No matter of colour creed caste or rich or poor, all deserves the right equal treatment in their life. That's what Maya Angelou has taught us and that's what she believed in. She was a great icon and fighter for not only Black people but for all the humanity, she loved humanity and she adored it, and she was indeed a great humanitarian and more of all wonderful human being.

Her novels are testimonial of her courage and especially her first novel *I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings*, shows us that a child who was very innocent didn't know about the ways of the world, by the end of the novel she was all grown up to be an individual, and didn't had the fear to live her rightful life in a Racially prejudiced world.

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