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**Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* :
A Race Critical Approach**

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Dedication

To those who instilled in me a never extinguished flame of passion towards learning.....

To my dearest parents

To all my family and friends

Nadjat

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I thank Allah for giving me the will and determination to continue this work.

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Abstract

The present research paper attempts at shedding light on the issue of racial discrimination in USA in the 20th C by considering Maya Angelou's first volume autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Angelou's book portrays different aspects of racism that blacks face. Besides, it beautifully depicts Angelou's life from the age of three to sixteen. The main objective of this work is to study how the book manifests the status of blacks in 1930s and 1940s America. Hence, the study is dealt with from the perspective of Critical Race theory. Deeply devastated by the assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., both her friends and colleagues in the Civil Rights Movement, Angelou was motivated to write the first volume of her autobiography. The book appeared in a period of abundant African American writings especially of women. The period was referred to as the "renaissance" of black women writers. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a documentation of African American history and heritage. Through it, Angelou could interrelate her personal life with the condition of her entire race in white hegemonic American society in 1930s and 1940s. Angelou's relation with civil rights activism thoroughly contributed to the writing of this book.

Keywords: racism, injustice, segregation, identity, hatred, Critical Race theory, Derrick Bell

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General Introduction

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Topic

Rooted back in the 18th C, African American literature stood for a call of equality between white and black Americans. Works like those of Phillis Wheatley, an ex African American slave, who could write the first African American book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religions and Moral* (1773), manifested a condemning tone against inferiority towards African Americans. By the 19th C, *Cotel*, the first black American novel, was published by William Wells Brown in 1853. Throughout the novel, Brown depicts the wickedness of slavery and racism in USA, as one of the slave narratives of the time. The 20th C African American literature was heightened by the Harlem Renaissance, an intellectual movement during which African American literature witnessed wide recognition. Celebrating works of art and literature, Harlem Renaissance succeeded in maintaining African American pride and black nationalism in a white dominant mainstream. Works of the period thrived in raising awareness on racial discrimination and in bringing understanding about African American experiences as Langston Hughes, one of the movement leaders, called it “an expression of our individual dark-skinned selves.” During the period, Hughes, in his poem, *I, too* (1926), openly criticizes the racial segregation imposed upon black Americans. In another different voice, Claude McKay’s poem, *If we must die* (1919), calls for fight against the oppression honoring black Americans.

By 1930, though Harlem Renaissance had ended, it did not cease to inspire Civil Rights movements in USA that emerged to call for justice and equality for African Americans. Emphasizing its concern with human conditions, contemporary African American literature continued to address issues of civil rights and injustices. Works like James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1952) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) eloquently manifested the lasting catastrophic consequences of slavery on the future of the nation in spite of its abolition earlier in 1865.

The present study deals with the 20th century celebrated literary work written by the African American author Maya Angelou. *I know why the caged bird sings* is the first of Angelou’s autobiography works. Published in 1969, it depicts the writer’s life from the age of three to sixteen. It mirrors her experiences as an African American in a white hegemonic society.

Motivation

“All my work, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith. While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated,” said Maya Angelou.

Encountering Maya Angelou’s spirit-raising quotes calls the researcher’s interest into the works of such a skillful writer whose concern became devoting her pen for survival. Maya Angelou is an awarded African American writer who gained much admiration in the literary field. The first of her autobiography books is chosen as the corpus of the current study due to the fact that it persuasively mirrors segregated America depicting forms of racism blacks encounter.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims at:

- Exploring racism and segregation on Black Americans in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.
- Highlighting the author’s journey towards self recognition.

Statement of the Problem

In her first volume of a series of her autobiography, Angelou portrays her tough endeavour to get hold of her own life which was first shaped by beyond her control circumstances. Being the child of separated parents, raped at the age of eight, and witnessing racial discrimination in Arkansas, Southern USA, have all formed obstacles that young Angelou had to overcome towards standing on solid ground as an independent African American. The present research attempts to portray and analyze Angelou’s work through Critical Race theory lenses exploring and undermining racism in USA in 1930s onwards.

Research Questions

The actual research seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the aspects of racism that African Americans face in *I Know Why the Caged bird Sings*?
- 2- How does the text undermine racist ideologies?

Research Hypothesis:

It is hypothesized that African Americans still experience the devastating consequences generated by slavery. Though long before, it was officially abolished, the American society still has room for racism. History repeating itself, racism is in fact, the child of slavery.

Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive analytic approach. It is to be conducted from critical race theory lenses to the text. Evidence should be driven from the corpus to highlight types of racism on black Americans and the author's journey towards achieving her own identity.

Structure of the Dissertation

The research is constructed through 3 chapters. The first includes African American literature stages, a survey of Afro-American movements contributing to African American literature during the 20th C. This is followed by a general account on Critical Race theory and a general overview of the corpus. The second chapter is about the current corpus, including its synopsis, characterization, themes, and the author's style. The last chapter centers around reading the corpus through the lenses of Critical Race theory dealing with aspects of racism black Americans suffered from in USA starting from 1930s to 1940s and depicting Angelou's journey from self-hatred to self-pride.

Part I: Theoretical Part

Chapter One:

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1.1. Introduction

African American writers have devoted their pens and lives for their race. Focusing their narratives on issues ranging from raising black awareness about their nationhood to issues on criticizing racism, they could maintain a position of black narrative next to white mainstream literature.

The chapter at hand studies African American literature surveying its stages from oral tradition to contemporary period. Furthermore, it highlights most themes at each period. Besides, the influence of prominent Afro-American movements on African American literature during the 20th C follows detailing each. In addition, Critical Race theory is presented with definition highlighting its basic tenets. Later, a historical background of the corpus under study and the author's life is included.

1.2. Stages of African American literature

Some define African American literature by the way black writers worked African rhetorical practices, myths, folklore, and traditions, while others argue that it is characterized by the writer's concern with slavery (warren 4). The African American narrative mission became to maintain the black race existence in a white mainstream society. Earlier, African American writings aimed at claiming Black Americans equal rights with the whites as the Declaration of Independence proposed that 'all men are created equal' (ibid.).

1.2.1. Oral Cultural Heritage

It refers to unwritten stories, old sayings, songs, and proverbs. They are passed from generation to another through spoken word. Those narratives provided solace and fostered a temporary release from the miser of chaotic experiences. Before enslavement in America, Africans believed in Nommo, which means the generative power of word. Oral tradition represents cultural product that is not written down. Being transmitted from a generation to another through spoken word by elder people known as griots who are excellent storytellers, it contributed to preserving the cultural heritage and manifesting the collective spirit of the race (Hamlet 74). These narratives formed consolation for the blacks. Oral tradition was a crucial component of Africans culture to the extent that slave traders used to separate members of the same community on slave ships restricting their

oral communication during the African transportation to America (ibid.). Providing consciousness by those slaves, oral tradition, indeed, was behind much of African American writings during antislavery era (Andrews 3). Much can be learned about the history of African Americans through the music of spirituals, blues, gospel, jazz and hip-hop. Frederick Douglass stated that the plantation spiritual “Run to Jesus, Shun the Danger” had inspired him for making his escape from slavery (ibid.).

1.2.2 Antebellum Literature

The first African American book was written by an enslaved woman, Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) to deny blacks inherent inferiority to whites through her poetry writing. Her poetry book proved against blacks intellectual inability which was a pretext for their slavers (Lueberin 3). Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789) was one of the first slave narratives and a forceful call for slavery abolition. Equiano is often deemed the originator of the slave narrative (Anderson 4). Portraying slaves abasement by their owners, *The Interesting Narrative* is credited for its argument against the cruel slave trade . Moreover, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) by Frederick Douglass is another body of political and social criticism that contributes to slavery abolition in USA and a call for blacks integration in society. In addition, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), was the first to address the sexual exploitation of women under slavery. It tells about the sufferings that she witnessed as a slave. In 1853, William Wells Brown, an internationally known fugitive slave narrator, authored the first Black American novel, *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter*, an antislavery that questions the terrible physical treatment of enslaved blacks, and the psychological effects of slavery on blacks. Later in 1858, Brown published the first African American play, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, based on themes of fugitive slave narratives, shedding light on white America’s racist ideologies and contributing to social reform (Detsi 2). In late 1850s, Martin R. Delany’s novel, *Blake; or, The Huts of America* was published. It is deemed one of the most important African American works of fiction of the 19th C. The protagonist’s mission is to unite the blacks, in the struggle for freedom.

1.2.3. The Civil War and Reconstruction

William Wells Brown's *My Southern Home* (1880) revolves around Brown's quest for a home in a land of slavery and racism. In the preface Brown portrays the book as partly a memoir, partly travel narrative, stating: "The earlier incidents were written out from the author's recollections. The later sketches here given, are the results of recent visits to the South, where the incidents were jotted down at the time of their occurrence, or as they fell from the lips of the narrators" (Brown 2). Besides, Devoted to the struggle for African American liberation, citizenship and civil rights during and after the Civil War, Douglass's *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881) came in two parts. The first describes Douglass' enslavement and the second describing his life as a free man. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), a volume of poems, provides an account on the concerns of African Americans living in the South as family, education, religion, slavery, Reconstruction and women's rights. She focuses the majority of her poems on abolition and racial equality. Harper made it clear that she decided to devote her life to the liberation of her people, "It may be that God Himself has written upon both my heart and brain a commissary to use time, talent, and energy in the cause of freedom" (Hill 60).

1.2.4. The Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

The expansion of education possibilities among African Americans after the Civil War helped form a strong literary aspiration in late 19th C (Luebering 5). Revolving around a variety of subjects in addition to black themes, Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *Sympathy* is one of his most famous statements about race. *We Wear the Mask* is a direct criticism of racism in America in the 1890s portraying the circumstances blacks lived in, obliging them to hide behind a mask covering themselves and their opinions. Jim Crow laws prevented the blacks in the south from their right to vote, and denied their rights in jobs and housing in the north. In Dunbar's novel, *The Sport of the Gods* (1901), in contrast with plantation fiction, he presented African Americans in urban settings rather than as primitive people who depend on their white owners. The novel sets the tone for the 19th C black novel's emphasis on urban themes. Morgan Harper's *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892) tackles the role of black women in the slave community and the black community during Reconstruction. The novel is written as a response to works that

portrayed blacks as evil, refusing these stereotypes (Elkins 44). Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) is a historical novel based on the Wilmington, North Carolina, race riot in 1898. It was reviewed throughout the United States as a timely study of current issues. In, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), Washington depicts his own life emphasizing the fact that Black people could prove themselves full members of the American society who deserve equal treatment (Luebering 6).

1.2.5 Contemporary African American literature

The start of contemporary literature was marked by the end of WWII. Literature written by African Americans during the contemporary period was formed by prominent figures and works such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952), James Baldwin's *Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959).

Contemporary African American literature is characterized by setting the narrative at different times. Some are situated at slavery, the early twentieth century, the civil rights movement; while others at the writer's present or the future. This fact helps showing the continuity of history. (Byerman 3) Contemporary black American literature is mainly trauma stories telling loss and survival, describing the psychological and social consequences of suffering. It shows black history power to shape black life.

From 1960s, African American literature witnessed a shift of interest to African American history (ibid.). It is in this period that black history became institutionalized forming a key part of American culture. Major African American writers have focused their literary efforts on the black past. They opted for reconstructing the past rather than telling stories of the present. Examples of such narratives include Charles R. Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a retelling of slavery that dated back to 1856 when a slave mother killed her two-years old daughter fearing slave catchers. *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988.

1.3. The influence of Afro-American Movements of the 20th C on black literature

African American literature was shaped according to the succession of the different Afro-American movements. Each has contributed to the main interests of black American writers.

1.3.1 Harlem Renaissance

Discrimination in the south during the first half of the 20th C led millions of African Americans to migrate to the northern states for better opportunities. Many had centered at Harlem. Harlem renaissance was a period of “New Negro.” This latter centered around a quest for self-identity and the change in the stereotypes that remained from slavery. Spanning from the 1920s to 1930s, Harlem Renaissance was a literary, artistic, and cultural movement that formed a source for inspiration and it set the stage for Black Arts movement of the sixties which promoted racial pride. Harlem renaissance had a lasting influence on African American literature and culture in the continuing exploration of the African American experience. It embraced poets, novelists, and playwrights whose publications explored themes promoting racial pride among African Americans.

Among the central figures of Harlem Renaissance was Claude McKay. In his poem, *If We Must Die* (1919) McKay called for resisting oppression violently. Langston Hughes was another important part of Harlem Renaissance. He was a poet, a social activist, a novelist, and a playwright. In his poem, *The Weary Blues* (1926), Hughes depicts the power of music in expressing feelings and the suffering of the African Americans.

As for novels, Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), is a collection of fiction, poetry, and drama about the African American experience in southern and northern USA. Rudolph Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho* (1928) portrays “Negro” society in New York during 1920s. Fisher makes emphasis on black unity.

1.3.2 Civil Rights Movement

During the Civil Rights Movement, African American literature was deeply concerned with racial segregation and black unity. Many factors led to the Civil Rights Movement including the rise of black consciousness and the impact of World War II among African Americans.

African American writers wanted to manifest African Americans importance in society. Though protests with the Civil Rights Movement were severe, African American writers never ceased to write about their race status quo including the unfair conditions and the need for equality. James Baldwin, a noted author of this period stated "it is astonishing that in a country so devoted to the individual, so many people should be afraid

to speak". Baldwin's novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, was one of the prominent works during the time tackling race and racism. In addition, Ralph Ellison wrote *The Invisible Man*, which resisted the social invisibility of the black people in America. Richard Wright is another author. His famous novels *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy* portrayed the experiences of African Americans.

Poetry also was used by African American poets to show their feelings of discontent with inequality. Noteworthy poets of the time included Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Danner, Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni.

1.3.3 Black Arts movement

The Black Arts movement stands for art that addresses the needs of African Americans. To fulfill this aim, it proposes a transformation in the western cultural aesthetic. It relates to the African Americans desire for self-determination and nationhood (Neal 10). The movement concern was to provide black artists with political voice. The movement was active during the 1960s and 1970s. The term "Black Arts" was first used positively by LeRoi Jones in his poem "We Own The Night" (1961)

We are unfair
And unfair
We are black magicians
Black arts
We make in black labs of the heart.
The fair are fair
And deathly white.
The day will not save them
And we own the night

Larry Neal put it in his defining essay *The Black Arts Movemen*:

"Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.... The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (ibid.)

Neal sums up the movement goals as the promotion of self-determination, solidarity, and nationhood among African Americans.

Niki Giovanni's poem "*The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro*" was named by *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* as one "that led to Giovanni's identification as an angry, militant poet." This poem is characterized by the use of expressions of militant nationalist sensibilities, direct appeals to African American audiences, critiques of antiblack racism, and affirmations of cultural heritage holding an aggressive approach to liberation, utilizing violent and nationalist rhetoric to encourage a presumably black audience to liberate their minds from the hegemony of whiteness (Reed 3) Other prominent poetry in the period included Don L. Lee's "*Move Un-Noticed to Be Noticed: A Nationhood Poem*" and Lee Sanchez's "*chant for young / brothas & sistuhs.*"

LeRoi Jones was the leading figure of the movement. In his essay, "The Revolutionary Theatre," he outlines the movement aim and concern:

The Revolutionary Theatre should force change, it should be change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen the ugliness and if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves.) We are preaching virtue again, but by that to mean NOW, what seems the most constructive use of the word. (3)

During the period, prominent playwrights who expressed the general mood of the Black Arts belief showed up like Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Ben Caldwell, Jimmy Stewart, Joe White, Charles Patterson, Charles Fuller, Aisha Hughes, Carol Freeman, and Jimmy Garrett.

The Black Arts movement was deeply concerned with Black Nationalism seeking to generate a strong black consciousness. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), by Malcolm X and Alex Haley, is one of its prominent literary expressions.

1.4 Critical Race Theory

Replacing the gap that civil rights movement left in the 1960s, Critical Race theory emerged in the United States. It is mainly concerned with issues related to race.

1.4.1 Definition

Critical Race theory is best to be deemed a new approach to civil rights (Tyson 368). It was initiated by Derrick Bell Jr. and others in 1970s. Critical Race theory shows how racism still exists undercover. In their book, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic defined critical race theory as follows:

The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious. (2-3)

1.4.2. Basic Tenets of Critical Race Theory

Although Critical Race theorists do not all agree on them, the following principles, discussed by Delgado and Stefancic, explain the basic tenets for critical race theory.

First, according to the theory, everyday racism is a common ordinary experience for people of colour in USA and it is the most stressful form of racism people of colour suffer. It is more prevailing than apparent racism manifested in verbal or physical attacks on people of colour. In fact these latter encounter everyday racism when they are treated with inferiority by whites, favouring whites over them, avoiding contact with them, keeping physical distance from them, underestimating their abilities,...etc. Moreover, everyday racism is shown in white people's denying the fact that racism exists accusing persons of colour of being oversensitive about segregation. It is proved that the emotional stress of managing everyday racism can destruct the psychological and physical health of people of colour.

Second, critical race theorists deem racism the result of interest convergence. This latter is referred to as material determinism. Derrick Bell uses the term "interest convergence" meaning that racism exists as a result of its convergence with the interest of whites. For example, racism may overlap with upper class whites financial interest who exploit black workers by paying them less than white workers. In addition, racism may

overlap with the psychological interest of working class whites who need to feel superior to others resulting from being exploited by upper class whites themselves.

Third, critical race theorists believe that race is socially constructed. The change in racial categorization over time according to US Census bureau between 1790 and 1920, reflects the fact that these categorizations were based on beliefs about race rather than on biological differences. From 1790 to 1810, according to the Bureau, the following categories were considered different races: free whites, all other free persons except Indians not taxed, and slaves. From 1820 to 1840 racial categories were as follows: free whites, unnaturalized foreigners (foreigners who were not U.S. citizens), free colored, and slaves. In 1850 and 1860 we had whites, blacks, mulattos (half-white, half-black), mulatto slaves, and black slaves. From 1870 to 1920 we had whites, blacks, mulattos, quadroons (one-quarter black), octoroons (one-eighth black), Chinese, Japanese, and Indians (Tyson 372). In fact, there is no scientific evidence proving the existence of different races (ibid.). Prince Brown Jr. stated:

All of the people in the world today. . . . regardless of their physical features readily exchange genes when they produce offspring. The variations in human traits . . . evident when we look at each other are anatomical and physiological adaptations . . . [to a] particular environment. . . . No particular set of traits is limited to any one group or “race.” . . . For example, while grey eyes are associated with a light complexion, they do occur among dark complexioned people—as do brown eyes and black eyes. In the same vein, curly hair is associated with dark skin but we all know light complexioned people who also have curly hair. . . . No particular set of traits cluster together to form one group or “race.” . . . [Rather] [s]ome people share similar traits . . . because they live in social isolation, which limits the availability of potential mates. . . . [That is,] [t]he social rules (customs, laws) of their society . . . prohibit them from mating with people whose features are different (ibid).

Fourth, critical race theorists believe that racism often takes the form of differential racialization. This latter refers to the change in racial characteristics set by the dominant society, based on the shift in its needs, on the minority groups. Before Civil War, white plantation owners chose to describe Africans as simple minded who are in need for the whites supervision, to justify their enslavement. This definition changed later when whites feared blacks competition for jobs. They described them as lazy and violent. That is to say, minorities are racialized in a way that serves the needs of whites (ibid.).

Fifth, everyone's identity is a product of intersectionality. In his article, *The problem with the phrase women and minorities: Intersectionality—an important theoretical framework for public health*, Bowleg defines intersectionality as “ a theoretical framework for understanding how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, SES [socioeconomic status], and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) at the macro social-structural level” (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1267). Identity is formed by different components: class, sex, political orientation, sexual orientation and personal history (ibid.).

Sixth, the experiences of racial minorities have given them a unique voice of colour. Minority writers are in a better position to write about racism. They are fully qualified to address issues of their race.

1.5. Corpus General Overview

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the first volume autobiography of the African American writer, Maya Angelou. Depicting her life from the age of three to sixteen, she reveals the status of the black race during 1930s and 1940s in America.

1.5.1. Historical Context

The publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* coincided with the end of the Civil Rights movement, the emergence of the Black Power Movement and the revival of Black Feminism. African American autobiography is a crucial tool of expression as Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes it: "Through autobiography, these writers could, at once, shape a public 'self' in language, and protest the degradation of their ethnic group by the multiple forms of American racism." Through her personal life experiences, Angelou represents the collective experience of her community raising awareness on racism they encounter.

Political autobiographies written by minorities aim at vocalizing real experiences of the working class, ethnic minorities, women, migrants and other minorities based on their sexual orientations resulting from silencing them out of racism, colonialism and the different forms of prejudice (Kamali 78). These narratives serve preserving the beliefs and cultural practices of their communities. This gives the political narrative a “resistance writing” nature (ibid.).

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is deemed an African American political autobiography. In an interview with Carol Neubauer, Angelou referred to the communal collective aspect of her autobiographical writing:

By the time I started *Gather Together* I had gone back and reread Frederick Douglass' slave narrative. Anyway, I love the idea of slave narrative, using the first person singular and meaning always the third person plural... And I see it all the time in the black literature, in the blues, and spirituals and the poetry, in essays James Baldwin uses it (286).

In the flow of her autobiography, Angelou records the collective experiences of her people. In depicting the everyday life and struggles of African Americans in the segregated South during 1930s and 1940s, Angelou addresses the racial issues present in the 1960s, the time the autobiography is published. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Angelou has referred to this collective experience in her autobiography:

When I wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I wasn't thinking so much about my own life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people. I kept thinking, what about that time?" What were the people around young Maya doing? I used the central figure – myself – as a focus to show how one person can make it through these times (Elliot 151).

In her autobiography, Angelou makes a reference to the Great Migration of African Americans from Southern to Northern USA, the racial discriminative working conditions, the Ku Klux Klan threat and the fear of lynching, the segregated educational system and the conditions of Blacks after the Second World War. Angelou's aim in recalling the racial discrimination of her childhood is to compare it with today's situation and the progress made by the African American protest movement of the 1950s- 60s (Kamali 80). Focusing on her personal life, Angelou, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, could create a literary autobiography that recalls the past with healing and reconciliation. (Braxton 162).

1.5.2. The Author's Life

She was born Marguerite Ann Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 4, 1928. She is the daughter of Bailey Johnson and Vivian Baxter Johnson. She got her name "Maya" from her elder brother Bailey. After their parents divorce in 1931, the two children were sent alone by train from Long Beach, California, to their paternal grandmother at Stamps, Arkansas with a note on their wrists "To Whom It May Concern" that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson Jr., from Long Beach, California en route to Stamps, Arkansas, c/o Mrs. Annie Henderson.

Young Angelou was so much fascinated by reading literature written, especially, by Shakespeare, Kipling, Poe, Thackeray, and James Weldon Butler, Paul Dunbar, Langston Hughes, W E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson.

In 1936, Angelou and her brother were returned to their mother in St. Louis. Staying with her mother Vivian, the eight year old Angelou witnessed a devastating experience when she was raped by her mother's friend Mr. Freeman. After the trial in which Angelou testified against Freeman, and after being freed from prison, Freeman was found dead. Regretting her testimony resulting in the death of Freeman, little Angelou chose to go silent indulging in her private world refusing to speak except to her brother Bailey.

The succession of the shocking events were a heavy burden on little Angelou. Her mother decided to return her to live with her grandmother at Stamps. Angelou, with the help of her grandmother and Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a black Southern aristocrat woman, could at last build her self-esteem and excel at school.

After Angelou's graduation from the eighth grade at Lafayette County Training School in 1940, she and her brother Bailey rejoined their mother and stayed at San Francisco. At the age of sixteen, Angelou became the first African American streetcar conductor. After her graduation from school, she gave birth to her son Guy, being a single mother. To raise her child, Angelou moved to California doing many jobs.

In late 1950s, Angelou moved to New York joining Harlem Writers Guild with the encouragement of black poet John Oliver Killens. She was a singer, a dancer. In 1961, she went to Egypt in which she was the first female editor of the *Arab Observer*, a Cairo news weekly. She later moved to Ghana in which she wrote for the *Ghanaian Times* and the *African Review*, a political journal.

At the time of her father's death, she returned to Los Angeles. Presidents Ford and Carter appointed her to honorary positions: the Bicentennial Commission and the National

Commission on the Observance of the International Women's Year. She was asked to give speeches at groups such as the Family Service Convention, Michigan State Celebrity Lecture series, Tennessee Humanities Council, Coalition of 100 Black Women, and Johns Hopkins University's Milton S. Eisenhower Symposium. She used to lecture topics of humanistic nature about acceptance and coexistence. Despite the fact she did not receive any college education, she became a professor of American studies at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1981 and was referred to as Dr. Angelou.

Inspired by Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *Sympathy*, and encouraged by writer James Baldwin, Angelou decided to write her autobiography. Written over the course of six months and isolated in a hotel room, from early morning to noon, Angelou could finish her first volume autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first nonfiction bestseller by an African American woman. Angelou published several collections of poetry, but her most famous was 1971's collection *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die*, which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. In January 1993, she recited her well-known poem *On the Pulse of Morning*, at the inaugural ceremony of President Bill Clinton.

She held honorary degrees from different American universities and received many awards. Maya Angelou died in May 28, 2014, at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. "Each of us, famous or infamous, is a role model for somebody, and if we aren't, we should behave as though we are — cheerful, kind, loving, courteous. Because you can be sure someone is watching and taking deliberate and diligent notes," said Maya Angelou.

1.6. Critical Review

Until fairly recently, black writing in general was barely mentioned as literature – if mentioned at all it was usually in some other context – and until very recently, autobiography received much the same treatment. Moreover, women writers have not always been given due consideration as makers of literature. But here we have an autobiography by a black woman, published in the present decade (1970), that already has its own critical literature. ... And here is a most striking sign of the critical/cultural times: her autobiography was Maya Angelou's first book (Olney 15).

The secret of Angelou's enormous appeal to American readers, whether white or black, [is] because her remarkable literary voice speaks to something in the universal American 'little me within the big me.' Most Americans, of whatever race or ethnic origin, share the sense that experience, however terrible, can be endured because their deepest self is beyond experience and cannot be destroyed (Bloom 1).

Angelou in her autobiographical fiction expressed the various forms of resistance of the blacks against racism. Despite recognizing the personally empowering nature of these instances of resistance, Maya's descriptions illustrate that such resistance serves to save the African - American community from drowning in the inevitable desperation. During the months she spent writing the book, practically withdrew from the world. She'd set the bar high. Her ambition was to write a book that would expose the Black experience and affirm the human spirit. She more than achieved her goal. She wrote a coming-of-age story that has become a modern classic (Gillespie, 40).

1.7. Conclusion

In a nutshell, it can be stated that going through different successive stages, African American literature proved to be a powerful tool in the hands of black writers in depicting, establishing and maintaining their race existence in white America. Their voices are devoted to the fact that they deserve equal treatment and rights.

Part II: Practical Part

Chapter Two

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: Thematic Analysis

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2.1. Introduction

The current chapter is devoted to tackling the corpus through its synopsis, characterization, themes, and style. Each element, contributing to the overall of the autobiography, has to do with how racism manifests itself in the corpus.

2.2. Synopsis of the Story

I know Why the Caged Bird Sings is Angelou's autobiography in which she tells her story from the age of 3 till 16. The first chapter begins by depicting Angelou's life after her parents divorce, showing her arrival with her one year elder brother, Bailey, by train to live with their grandmother in Arkansas. The grandmother owned the only store managed by a black person. It is in the store that young Maya and Bailey spent much of their time in which Maya started to witness whites injustices towards the blacks including whites girls ridiculing her grandmother.

When Angelou became eight, she was returned with her brother to their mother Vivian in the North. It is at this period of time that young Maya was raped by her mother's boyfriend, Freeman. Young Maya was got home back to Stamps after being mute not willing to speak to anybody except Bailey. At Stamps, she was introduced to a black well educated woman called Mrs. Flowers who helped her speak again by encouraging her to read literature aloud, poetry in particular.

At the age of ten, Angelou was working as a maid at a white woman's house in which she felt offended when the woman called her "Mary." Another incident of segregation happened to her when a white dentist refused to treat her saying he would rather put his hands in a dog's mouth instead of a black's. Later, the killing of a black man by a white worsened their situation urging the whole family to leave stamps moving to California where Maya's mother lived. Later they moved to San Francisco where, at the age of 16, Angelou got a job as the first street car conductor. The book ends at Angelou becoming a single mother for her son, Guy. Considering what she did a disgrace, as she wrote on the note she left for her mother and step-father, Angelou's relation with her baby could make her feel the satisfaction she could not feel during all her adolescence.

2.3 Characterization

The literary work at hand represents a repertoire of figures due to whom this piece of work comes to life. As a diverse between dynamic, static, or round the following set of personages stand essential in the development of the story.

Marguerite "Maya" Johnson, the daughter of separated parents, whose life the book revolves around. Besides her parents divorce at the age of three, she witnessed displacement, racial segregation, and being raped at the age of eight. The final chapter of the book is devoted to her disguising pregnancy and her giving birth as a single mother after which she felt for the first time she is an independent person with the possession, her son, she now has.

Bailey Johnson, Junior, Maya Angelou's elder brother whom she deeply loves. He used to amuse her with his sense of humor. In the absence of their parents, together with their grandmother, he used to offer her protection and defend her against the insults made on her by children. When she decided to keep silent after the rape incident, Bailey was the only person she was talking to. When she was pregnant, he was the first she informed. He warned her not to tell their mother, otherwise she would be stopped from school. Angelou describes him as her heaven, "Of all the needs (there are none imaginary) a lonely child has, the one that must be satisfied, if there is going to be hope and a hope of wholeness, is the unshaking need for an unshakable God. My pretty black brother was my Kingdom Come" (Angelou 23).

Annie Henderson, called "Momma" by Maya and Bailey, is their parental grandmother. She provided for her. After their parents divorce, she provided for her grandchildren the protection, care, and shelter. She was the only black female that owns a business at Stamps, managing a store for twenty five years. She was a very religious woman who never answers questions directed to her except that on religion. She was treated with much esteem.

Bailey Johnson, Maya's and Bailey's father who does not connect or care for. In her book, *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*, Mary Jane Lupton describes Bailey Johnson as "He represents the absent father, the man who is not there for his children, literally and figuratively".

Vivian Baxter, Maya's and Bailey's mother. She abandoned them at an early age after her divorce. When Angelou was 13, she returned back to her. She could not call her "mother" because she thinks "she is beautiful and does not look like a mother." (Angelou 206). The lack of intimacy between the daughter and her mother prevented Angelou from calling her "mother." Instead, she used to call her "ma'am." It was for the first time, when she gave birth to her son Guy, that Angelou could call her "mother." In an interview with Judith Patterson, in 1982, Angelou said about her mother "Well, she was a poor mother for a child. She didn't know what to do with kids, except feed us and things like that."

Willie Johnson, Maya's and Bailey's uncle. He lives with his mother, Annie Henderson, whom he helps in raising the two children and doing the work at the store. Though he is a strict man that he punishes the two children when they misbehave, they love him. He suffered from a disability since the age of three. This resulted in his being ridiculed by the workers in the town.

Grandfather Baxter, Maya's and Bailey's maternal grandfather. He is known for his extreme love for his family. He had a famous saying, "Bah Jesus, I live for my wife, my children and my dog" (Angelou 61).

Grandmother Baxter, Maya's and Bailey's maternal grandmother. She is a nearly white. Raised by a German family in Cairo, Illinois, she had a German accent. Her white skin brought her great respect. (Angelou 62).

The Baxter Uncles (Uncle Tutti, Uncle Tom, Uncle Ira, and Uncle Billy), Maya's and Bailey's uncles (their mother's brothers). Except Billy, who was the youngest, they were frightening characters known for their temper. Grandfather Baxter told them "Ban Jesus, if you ever get in jail for stealing or some such foolishness, I'll let you rot. But if you're arrested for fighting, I'll sell the house, lock, stock, and barrel, to get you out!" (Angelou 66). Angelou's uncles used to like each other to the extent they did not need to have friends. (ibid).

Mr. Freeman, Angelou's mother boyfriend. When Angelou was eight and at the time she and Bailey came to live with their mother at St. Louis, he raped her and threatened her not to tell what happened otherwise he would kill her brother. At the court, Angelou said the truth resulting in imprisoning Freeman. After few days, he was released. Freeman was found dead without knowing the murder.

Daddy Clidell, the husband of Angelou's mother who got married soon after WWII started. He was a successful businessman. Angelou loved him to the extent she considered him a father.

Mrs. Bertha Flowers, grandmother Johnson friend, a gentle educated black lady. She could help young Maya overcome her post rape silence by encouraging her to read poetry aloud. Meeting her, Angelou could feel she is liked and respected not because being the granddaughter of Mrs. Johnson or Bailey's sister but for being her per se. She made Angelou feel proud with her identity being Negro. "It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself" (Angelou 95).

Reverend Howard Thomas, a church preacher. He often visits grandmother Johnson at home and make long talks with her and her son, Willie. Young Angelou finds not bothering himself to remember her and her brother's names insulting.

Sister Monroe, a member of the church in stamps.

Mr. McElroy, grandmother Johnson's neighbour. He never laughed, rarely smiled. He owned a land and a big house. He was an independent black man that Angelou described as "a mystery in my childhood."

"Powhitetrash" girls, three white girls. They ridiculed Angelou's grandmother. The incident made Angelou cry.

Dentist Lincoln, a white dentist in Stamps with whom Angelou had a painful incident. When she had cavities, he refused treating her saying he would prefer putting his "hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's."

Dolores Stockland, Angelou's father girlfriend whom she did not like because of her "meanness, pettiness, and pretense," and who did not like Angelou because she is "tall and arrogant and not clean enough," Angelou believes.

Viola Cullinan, a white woman whom Angelou worked in her house. She used to call Angelou call "Mary." That made Angelou upset. Looking for a convincing way to leave her house, Angelou decided to break Cullinan's preferred dishes.

Henry Reed, the valedictorian of the 1940 graduating class of Lafayette County Training School at which he sang the black national anthem "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" which the students and their parents joined. Describing her feeling at that graduation day, Angelou

stated: “I was no longer only a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race.”

2.4. Themes

The diversity of Angelou’s concerns in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* grants it a sense of richness with different themes interrelating weaving a thematic unity that emphasizes the fact of being a coming of age story and a vivid portrayal of the racial discrimination made on the black race.

2.4.1. Racism and Segregation

In her autobiography, Angelou depicts a number of incidents in which she witnessed racism and segregation. She encountered segregation at young age. In her early childhood, she used to imagine herself being a white girl with fair hair. In her town, Stamps, young Angelou saw different discriminatory attitudes such as the scornful speech delivered by a white speaker at her eighth-grade graduation, her white boss’s insistence on changing her name, calling her ‘Mary’, and a white dentist’s refusal to treat her.

2.4.2. Resistance to Racism

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, racism is reacted to in different forms by different characters ranging from helpless anger to subtle resistance to active protest. While, for example, Angelou’s grandmother “Momma,” chooses to be silent, her uncles choose toughness. Angelou in her early childhood is seen crying over Momma’s being ridiculed by white girls. However, later as she grows up, she could resist a white woman over calling her “Mary” by breaking her dishes. Moreover, she courageously became the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco.

In an interview with George Plimpton, for *The Paris Review*, Angelou commented:

There is, I hope, a thesis in my work: we may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. That sounds goody-two-shoes, I know, but I believe that a diamond is the result of extreme pressure and time. Less time is crystal. Less than that is coal. Less than that is fossilized leaves. Less than that it’s just plain dirt. In all my work, in the movies I write, the lyrics, the poetry, the prose, the essays, I am saying that we may encounter many defeats—maybe it’s imperative that we encounter the

defeats—but we are much stronger than we appear to be and maybe much better than we allow ourselves to be.

2.4.3. Family

Research done on the power of human relationships for child development shows that adult mentors are an effective way to help troubled children (Challener 10). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005), a pioneer in studying the behavior of children in their natural life space of family, school, peer group, and community, wrote an article answering the question “What do successful families do to help children develop successfully. Bronfenbrenner believes that the existence of a committed adult willing to be involved in ongoing complex exchanges of ideas and feelings with a child is vital to their well being and development (ibid). Bronfenbrenner stated: “intellectually emotionally, socially and morally, a child requires participation in progressively more complex reciprocal activity on a regular basis over an extended period in the child's life, with one or more persons with whom the child develops a strong, mutual, irrational, emotional attachment and who is committed to the child's well-being and development, preferably for life (ibid).

Family relationships play a significant role in Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Indeed, examples of such relationships can be traced, first, in the case of Angelou’s grandmother, “Momma.” Mrs. Johnson is a caring woman who gave Maya and Bailey a sense of belonging. Describing her, Angelou stated: “Her world was bordered on all sides by work, duty, religion, and “her place.” I don’t think she ever knew that a deep love hung over everything she touched” (Angelou, p 57). Momma’s love and care for young Maya, could foster her self esteem.

Besides, Angelou’s brother, Bailey, was an abundant source of care and security against all the obstacles she went through. The autobiography beautifully depicts their company since they were three and four while being sent, by their parents, alone by train from California to Stamps.

Moreover, familial bonds are shown in the case of Grandfather Baxter. He was a committed father and husband. He said: “I live for my wife, my children and my dog.”

In spite of not being a member of her family, Mrs. Flowers, too, provided much attention for young Maya. Indeed, Mrs. Flowers was so much devoted to her helping her to build self-esteem through constant dialogues that used to arise between them. Angelou met Mrs. Flowers during her silence period after her rape incident. Young Angelou could

not get out of that world of silence without the help of Mrs. Flowers who welcomed her at her house, making cooking especially for her, and encouraging her to memorize poems to be read for her. Little Maya could recognize such deeds and details when Mrs. Flowers pronounce her name correctly “Marguerite.” She felt loved and respected.

2.4.4. Displacement

Geographic movements had notable impact on Angelou’s growing identity (Arensberg 274). This movement between different American cities was of two sides. It serves her in adapting to the different changing environments. However, it formed a threat in losing or breaking down her identity (ibid). Angelou stated: “In San Francisco, for the first time, I saw myself as part of something” (Angelou 212). In *I Know Why the Caged bird Sings*, displacement is highlighted since the preface of the book. The opening phrase reads: “What are you looking at me for, I did not come to stay” (Angelou 1). This line forms the beginning of a poem, Angelou is supposed to recite in the church.

Though she followed a chronological order in telling the incidents in her autobiography, Angelou chose to start her book by the scene in which she is depicted trying to read the poem, emphasizing the fact of displacement which is a prevailing aspect of her life (Arensberg 274). Primarily marked by her sending away at the age of three from California to Stamps, Angelou compares her displacement to having a razor at one’s throat: “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” (Angelou 4).

2.5. Style

Angelou’s use of effective literary techniques contributes to the creation of a distinctive voice that characterizes her autobiography. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is abounding with such techniques like simile, alliteration, repetition, and allusion, and irony.

First, simile is used to compare two different things to make the text more vivid using words of comparison like: as, such as, like, ...etc. Examples from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are:

- I was called Old Lady and chided for moving and talking like winter's molasses (Angelou 74).

- [Bailey] smelled like a vinegar barrel or a sour angel (Angelou 25).

Second, alliteration is the repetition of a sound at the beginning of successive or nearly successive words. For example:

- I mastered the art of crocheting and tatting, and there was a lifetime's supply of **d**ainty **d**oilies that would never be used in sacheted **d**resser **d**rawers (Angelou 114).
- The time crowded together and at an End of Days I was swinging on the back of the rackets trolley, **s**miling **s**weetly and persuading my charges to "step forward in the car, please" (Angelou 289).

Third, to emphasize an idea, comes the use of repetition. For instance, "**She** lived in the country and couldn't get to church every Sunday, so **she** made up for her absences by shouting so hard when **she** did make it that **she** shook the whole church" (Angelou 39).

Fourth, allusion is an indirect reference to another literary work or to a well-known person, place, or event. In African American literature, there are many allusions to the Bible and to historical events. In Angelou's autobiography, that is used in the following examples:

- My pretty Black brother was my Kingdom Come (Angelou 23).
- The laws were so absolute, so clearly set down, that I knew if a person truly wanted to avoid hell and brimstone, and being roasted forever in the devil's fire, all she had to do was memorize Deuteronomy and follow its teaching, word for word (Angelou 42).

Fifth, irony is when an utterance does not literally mean what it says. Sometimes, irony is sarcastic. When describing the extent to which racism is in Stamps, Arkansas, Angelou writes, "People in Stamps used to say that the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn't buy vanilla ice cream except on July Fourth. Other days he had to be satisfied with chocolate." Angelou does not mean that the black are permitted to eat vanilla ice cream only on July 4th but rather it is her way of depicting the level of segregation in her town.

2.6. Conclusion

Chapter two tried to shed light on Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Besides, it gave an overview about the autobiography. The chapter attempts to highlight characterization, themes, and style of the writer.

Chapter Three:
Corpus Analysis
According to Critical Race Theory

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3.1. Introduction

This chapter is the practical part which describes aspects of racism in Angelou's autobiography and her journey from self-hatred to self-pride. It is to be conducted through the perspective of Critical Race theory.

3.2. Aspects of Racism in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

The current literary work exhibits a variety of how discrimination against black Americans in the 1930s and 1940s looked like. Delving into it through the lenses of Critical Race theory, the following instances could be traced.

3.2.1 Everyday Racism

Black people in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* witness different forms of segregation under all its forms notably racial and gender. A common type is everyday racism. The autobiography is set in a time of severe segregation against black Americans. Though happened at her very early childhood, young Angelou could still remember the extent to which what segregation at southern USA looked like.

In Stamps, the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really; absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed. I remember never believing that whites were really real" (Angelou 27).

Throughout the entire book, it is hinted at that in this culture, the White race is superior to the Black race. Whites could say whatever they wanted to or about Blacks, and they knew that they could do nothing about it. This was shown in Chapter 3, when Uncle Willie was in great fear that he would be hunted and killed by the Klu Klux Klan. If they wanted him dead, then he was dead. There was no one stopping them. In Chapter 3, Angelou continuously talks about how she feels bad for Uncle Willie, and in this chapter, she constantly notes about how she could hear Uncle Willie moaning in fear and anxiety when was hiding fearing the KKK attack on the Store in search of a black man to kill. "He moaned the whole night through as if he had, in fact, been guilty of some heinous crime"

(Angelou 21).

This event has an effect on Maya, where she is scared for her and her family's lives. She now sees what it is like to live in the Deep South in the 1930s. She realizes the precautions that she had to take in order to survive living in this society.

Common lynchings committed by Ku Klux Klan were widespread. In Chapter 25, Bailey returns home terrified after seeing a white man fishing a dead black man's body out of a lake. "Bailey said he saw a man, a colored man, whom nobody had delivered. *He* was dead.... The man was dead and rotten" (Angelou 211). Bailey is shocked at the white men behavior making fun over the dead black man. He asks his Uncle Willie: "Why do they hate us so much" (Angelou 27). It is at this incident that Momma plans for her grandchildren to go back to California protecting them from the evil of the severe racism at the south.

In chapter 5, Angelou tells her experience with three white girls whom she calls "powhitetrash." She depicts them behaving in her grandmother's Store freely in an annoying way. Moreover, they address grandmother disrespectfully with her first name, to which Angelou felt astonished: "to Momma? Who owned the land they lived on? Who forgot more than they would ever learn? If there was any justice in the world, god should strike them dumb at once!" (Angelou 31). Later, Angelou portrays the girls ridiculing her grandmother. This later showed no reaction but rather addressed the girls respectfully serving their orders in the Store. "Here's sugar, Miz Potter, and here's baking powder. You didn't buy soda last month, you'll probably be needing some" (Angelou 31). Angelou accurately depicted the white girls behavior towards the grandmother when she recorded them never looking at her face. "At least they never looked in her face, or I never caught them doing" (Angelou 31). Angelou felt great anger because she could not react following her grandmother's orders to enter the Store and keep silent. She felt deeply frustrated at the whole incident.

"When I was around ten years old, those scruffy children caused me the most painful and confusing experience I had ever had with my grandmother [...] I wanted to throw a handful of black pepper in their faces, to throw lye on them, to scream that they were dirty, scummy peckerwoods, but I knew I was as clearly imprisoned behind the

scene as the actors outside were confined to their roles” (Angelou 31-33).

In spite of their tries of agitation, grandmother simply said her prayers. She and her granddaughter are prevented of reacting to whites acts of racism after knowing what would happen to blacks messing with whites especially after what they learned about Uncle Willie in chapter 3.

While working for a white woman, Mrs. Cullinan, Angelou was in front of another incident of racism when the woman insisted on calling her “*Mary*” instead of Margaret. “That’s too long. She is Mary from now on” (Angelou 118). Describing how this made her feel, Angelou stated:

Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being ‘called out of his name.’ It was a 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. (Angelou, p 118).

Angelou felt insulted and thus reacted by breaking Mrs. Cullinan’s favourite dishes. Mrs. Cullinan, in return, turned all the anger on young Angelou calling her “That clumsy nigger. Clumsy little black nigger.” (Angelou 120).

3.2.2 Institutional Racism

In chapter 3, Angelou recalls the incident when the former Sheriff, Mr. Steward comes warning her grandmother so that her son, Willie, do not show up because a white woman got messed with by a black and Willie is in danger of getting lynched. “Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys’ll be coming over here later.” (Angelou 19-20)

Commenting on the Sheriff’s behaviour, Angelou disapproves of his wording. Angelou reproves of Mr. Steward’s description of the KKK riders as merely boys.

The “boys”? Those cement faces and eyes of hate that burned the clothes off you if they happened to see you lounging on the main street downtown on Saturday. Boys? It seemed that youth had never happened to them. Boys? No, rather men who were covered

with the graves' and age without beauty or learning. The ugliness and rottenness of old abominations. (Angelou, 20)

At Lafayette County Training School, the school for blacks, in which she was a student, Angelou could distinguish its inferiority to white school. She notes that it is poorly equipped lacking necessary materials.

Unlike the white high school, Lafayette Country Training School distinguished itself by having neither lawn, nor hedges, nor tennis court, nor climbing ivy. Its two buildings (main classrooms, the grade school and home economics) were set on a dirt hill with no fence to limit either its boundaries or those of bordering farms. (Angelou 183)

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou shows how segregation at the level of schools in Stamps, Arkansas, Southern USA, is crystal clear. At her graduation day, during a speech at her school, delivered by Mr. Donleavy, a white official, informs the audience about the conditions and improvements for the white school:

The Central School (naturally, the white school was Central) had already been granted improvements that would be in use in the fall. A well-known artist was coming from Little Rock to teach art to them. They were going to have the newest microscopes and chemistry equipment for their laboratory. Mr. Donleavy did not leave us long in the dark over who made these improvements available to Central High. Nor were we to be ignored in the general betterment scheme he had in mind (Angelou 192).

Moreover, in her experience with the white dentist, Dr Lincoln, Angelou was a victim of a direct prejudice against blacks. At the age of ten, her grandmother accompanied her to the dentist when feeling bad with toothache. Unfortunately, they were received bitterly. Though he owes Angelou's grandmother a debt, Dr. Lincoln refused to treat young Maya. He put it harshly direct: "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (Angelou 203). In fact, this incident adds more emphasis to racism in the mind of young Anglou.

Besides, in chapter 34, Angelou is in front of another incident of institutional racism. This is when she decided to apply for a job as a streetcar conductor. At the receptionist office in the car company, she was received with intended delaying. Though

her mother told her that they do not accept coloured people on the streetcars, she still felt determined to get the job. Angelou describes her confrontation with the receptionist as: “The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes in the final scene, where, because of harm done by one ancestor to another, we were bound to duel to the death. Also because the play must end somewhere” (Angelou 286).

In describing her confrontation with racism in this incident, Angelou uses the word “*play*” revealing an institutional nature of racism that is inherited recurring from ancestor to another. She goes on emphasizing the fact of racism in this scene, stating: “The whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white” (Angelou 287).

3.2.3 Internalized Racism

The mainstream culture in America at the time of narrating the story was that white is beautiful. This had clearly affected how young Angelou thought about herself. In the book, she is portrayed as believing herself as an unattractive ugly girl, comparing herself to white girls. In so doing, she exhibited a sense of feeling inferiority. She used to dream that one day she wakes up becoming a beautiful white girl.

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blonde, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten ? My light blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about 'my daddy must of been a Chinama' (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty. they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoken the language like they did, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails. Because I was really white and a cruel magician had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with kinky black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth that would hold a pencil. (Angelou 5)

3.2.4 Intersectionality

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, gender and race intersect forming two layers of racism. In chapter 13, at the trial of Mr. Freeman, Angelou's rapist, Angelou is asked by his lawyer, “you mean to say this man raped you and you don't know what he was

wearing? He snickered as if I had raped Mr. Freeman. ‘Do you know if you were raped?’ (Angelou 90)

Compared to the incident in chapter 3 where Uncle Willie is feared of getting lynched after a white woman got messed with by a black, the incident in the trial reveals how much prejudice black females are victims of.

The intersection of being a victim of race and gender at the same time is evident too in chapter 23. At her graduation day, the white man who was there to deliver a speech made a reminder that two ex-students of Lafayette Country Training School (the school for blacks) became successful athletes. Here, Angelou felt deeply insulted at the clear discrimination between the future opportunities of white and black boys, with the vivid absence of mentioning girls at all. “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises ” (Angelou 193).

3.3. Angelou’s journey from self hatred to race-pride

Throughout her autobiography, Angelou went through different stages. Contributing to her overall growth, each stage has something race-related aspect and thus it is dealt with in more details.

3.3.1. Self hatred

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings beautifully depicts Angelou’s journey from a cruel childhood filled with tough experiences manifested in racism, sexual abuse, and displacement. These experiences were a heavy burden on the shoulders of young Angelou but she could overcome, changing into a proud, strong, and independent person at the age of sixteen.

At the starting chapters of her autobiography, Angelou portrays herself as a girl with low self esteem. At an early age, with the influence of the whites’ dominant culture that gives much interest in physical appearance, Angelou is depicted a girl who feels shame about her appearance to the extent of dreaming being a beautiful white girl. “Wouldn’t

they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blonde, would take the place of the kinky mass” (Angelou 4)

3.3.2. Angelou and the power of words

A crucial period of her life was that when she was raped. The incident resulted in causing her to go silent refusing to speak after the death of her rapist. While being caged in the world of silence, Angelou met Mrs. Bertha flowers, a black woman who introduced her to the world of literature.

Literature played a prominent factor in the formation of Angelou’s identity. The reality in Stamps, indeed, led her to resort to reading classic literature especially the works of Shakespeare, Kipling, Poe, Thackeray, and James Weldon Butler, Paul Dunbar, Langston Hughes, W E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson.

During these years in Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love. Although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois” „Litany at Atlanta. (Angelou 16)

Indeed, being interested in reading both whites and blacks literature, Angelou manifested a tolerant attitude towards races. Despite the racial environment in which she lived, she was never changed by the impact of such acts.

3.3.3. Race and Pride

Mrs. Flowers not only could make Angelou speak but she could get her out of her imprisoned self for Angelou could feel the pride in herself being black. “It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself.” (Angelou 103)

Talking about her race, even after listening to the insulting speech delivered by a white man at the graduation ceremony, Angelou feels proud of being who she is. “We were on top again. As always, again. We survived..... I was no longer only a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race.” (Angelou 198)

3.3.4. Angelou and Displacement

Different places have different impacts on Angelou. Her stay at Stamps, in her early years, gave her deep insight into the black community, especially with the help of her grandmother's store which is considered the center of their life. Later, after moving to California, she met a group of kids at her age with which she spent a month in the old cars junkyard. Angelou describes the extent to which she benefited from this company.

After a month my thinking processes had so changed that I was hardly recognizable to myself. The unquestioning acceptance by my peers had dislodged the familiar insecurity. Odd that the homeless children, the silt of war frenzy, could initiate me into the brotherhood of man.I was never again to sense myself so solidly outside the pale of the human race. The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life” (Angelou 272).

Through the above quotation, it can be stated that Angelou is reforming the American society. She alludes to Martin Luther King Jr. famous speech “I Have a Dream” at the March in Washington DC. in August 28, 1963:

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama — with its vicious racists, with its Governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification — one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers (King 1).

In this company that lasted for a month, Angelou could live the life that she, as a black girl, yearns everyone of her race could have. That is the life in which all people are equal despite of their race and gender.

In the final part of the autobiography, getting back to San Francisco, Angelou tells her story with struggle to get a job. After many attempts applying for the job, she could become the first black streetcar conductor. “My mind shouted energetically I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BE A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHANGER FROM MY BELT. I WOULD” (Angelou 287)

3.4.Conclusion

During the current autobiography, race has punctuated every aspect of Angelou's life and the lives of her community. Thus, Critical Race theory imposes itself in dealing with the literary work under study. Angelou has depicted instances of racial and gender discrimination whether isolated or interrelated.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Maya Angelou reveals the status of Black Americans in the 1930s and 1940s. She eloquently tells about Black American history through her personal life and the lives of her community members. She presents her readers with a vivid documentation of what America was like for the Blacks. The fact that is still so much relevant nowadays. Growing up in southern USA, Angelou is an eye witness for the racial discrimination.

Through this study, the researcher attempted to investigate the different types of racism in Angelou's autobiography through the lenses of critical race theory. The purpose was to highlight the different experiences of the characters in the book witnessing racial segregation. However, being a person devoted to foster hope and empowerment through emphasizing the sense of survival, her autobiography exemplifies a transformation of a black girl victim of racism with a complex inferiority into a proud young woman capable of proving herself in front of all the prejudice against her race.

As the title suggests, indeed, Angelou compares herself and the people of her community to a caged bird. But the bird is never silent. It sings in voicing its suffering and hardship the same as Angelou did in making the issue of her entire race a must heard.

We hope that this study serves providing some theoretical and practical ideas about the corpus under study. We hope also that it opens new perspectives for students of literature into further researching about Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

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ملخص

تسلط هذا الدراسة الضوء على قضية التمييز العرقي في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية في القرن العشرين من خلال الجزء الاول من السيرة الذاتية للكاتبة الأمريكية مايا أنجلو، *أعرف لماذا يغني الطائر الحبيس* (1969). هذا الكتاب يصف انواع التمييز التي عانى منها الأمريكيين السود كما تصف حياة الكاتبة ابتداء من سن الثالثة الى السادس عشر. الهدف الرئيس لهذا العمل هو دراسة كيفية معالجة سيرة أنجلو لأوضاع الأمريكيان السود خلال ثلاثينيات و أربعينيات القرن الماضي. لذلك ارتأت الدراسة الى استخدام نظرية العرق النقدية. تأثرها باغتيال صديقها و زميلها في النضال من اجل حركة الحقوق المدنية، مالكوم أكس و مارتن لوثر كينغ ، شجع الكاتبة مايا أنجلو على كتابة الجزء الاول من سيرتها الذاتية. تزامن الكتاب مع فترة عرفت غزارة في الانتاج الادبي الأفرو-أمريكي خاصة النسوي منه. الفترة التي كانت توصف ب"النهضة" للكاتبات الأمريكيات السود. يعتبر كتاب *أعرف لماذا يغني الطائر الحبيس* توثيق لتاريخ الأمريكيين السود في الولايات المتحدة. من خلال الكتاب استطاعت الكاتبة المزج بين حياتها الشخصية و أوضاع عرقها في مجتمع يهيمن فيه الأمريكيين البيض. ارتباط مايا أنجلو بحركة الحقوق المدنية ساهم بشكل كبير في كتابة سيرتها التي هي قيد الدراسة.

كلمات مفتاحية: تمييز، ظلم، فصل، هوية، كره، نظرية العرق النقدية، ديريك بيل

Résumé :

Cette étude met en lumière la question de la discrimination raciale aux États-Unis d'Amérique au vingtième (20^{ème}) siècle à travers la première partie de la biographie *Je Sais Pourquoi Chante L'Oiseau En Cage* (1969) de l'auteure américaine Maya ANGELOU. Ce livre décrit les sortes de discrimination que les Américains noirs ont souffert, ainsi que la vie qu'elle avait l'auteur de l'âge de trois à seize ans. L'objectif principal de notre mémoire est d'étudier comment la biographie d'ANGELOU a abordée les conditions des américains noirs au cours des années 1930 et 1940. Donc l'étude pensait à utiliser la théorie critique de la race. Influencée par l'assassinat de ses amis et collègues dans la lutte pour les droits civiques Malcolm X et Martin Luther King, Maya ANGELOU a été encouragée à écrire la première partie de son autobiographie. Le livre coïncida aussi avec une période connu par une production littéraire Africo-américaine abondante notamment autour les femmes. Une période qui a été décrite comme la "renaissance" des écrivaines noires américaines. Le livre de Maya ANGELOU, *Je Sais Pourquoi Chante L'Oiseau En Cage* (1969), est considéré comme une documentation de l'histoire des Américains noirs aux États-Unis. À travers ce livre, l'écrivaine a pu faire un mélange entre sa vie personnelle et le statut de sa race dans une société où les Américains blancs l'ont dominé. L'engagement de Maya ANGELOU dans le mouvement des droits civiques a contribué de manière significative à la rédaction de sa biographie, qui est l'objet de cette étude.

Mots Clés : Discrimination, injustice, ségrégation, identité, haine, théorie critique raciale, Derrick Bell