

The Quest for Identity in Maya Angelou's Autobiography - A Study

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Abstract

This study examines Maya Angelou's autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings as a profound narrative of identity formation shaped by race, gender, trauma, and resilience. This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis methodology, employing close reading supported by feminist, psychological, and African American literary perspectives. This study is limited to Angelou's first autobiography, focusing on her experiences of racial segregation, sexual trauma, silence, and self-expression. This study contributes to the existing literary discourse by interpreting identity as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed condition, highlighting how trauma can become a source of empowerment. The study concludes that Angelou's journey from silence to voice symbolises both personal liberation and the collective struggle of African American women for dignity, self-hood, and cultural identity.

Keywords: African American Literature, Maya Angelou, Autobiography, Identity Formation, Trauma, Self-Empowerment

Introduction

African American literature reflects the lived realities of oppression, resistance, and self-assertion experienced by Black Americans. Among its prominent voices, Maya Angelou occupies a significant place in articulating personal trauma as a pathway to collective empowerment. Her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, documents her struggle to define her identity amidst racial discrimination, gender bias, and emotional violence.

Several critical studies on Angelou have examined her work from feminist, racial and autobiographical perspectives. However, existing studies largely emphasise either racial oppression or feminist resistance without sufficiently integrating identity formation as a holistic psychological or cultural process. There remains a research gap in examining how trauma, silence, and voice collectively shape her evolving sense of identity.

This study addresses this gap by analysing Angelou's autobiography as a journey of identity construction, wherein personal suffering transforms into moral strength and social consciousness. This study is justified as it highlights identity as a process shaped by experience, resilience, and self-expression rather than a fixed trait.

Art and Literature are integral parts of human life because they capture shared human experiences irrespective of caste, creed, gender, race, or colour. In literature, the writer has to explore universal emotions and human experiences in an artistic manner through creativity, style, and deep emotions. Maya Angelou explores all these emotions in her work of arts and stands with great writers like Tori Morrison, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and other Afro-American writers.

The subgenre of African American literature began only in the middle of the 19th century with slave narratives. In the early 1970s, this literature reached the mainstream as black writing. In this genre, Maya Angelou has written poetry, novels, and autobiographies. Some of the autobiographies by Maya Angelou are ‘I know why the caged bird sings’, ‘Gather together in my name’, ‘The heart of a woman’, ‘All god’s children need travelling shoes’, ‘A song Flung up to heaven’, ‘Mom& me and Mom’ etc. For Maya Angelou, survival of the self is a complex phenomenon. Any act to find the evolution of the self through daily activities might cause the emergence of individuality. Maya Angelou’s first autobiography “I know why the caged bird sings” (1969) the readers find the protagonist suffering with her surrounding society, community and herself in the action of defining as an individual. The survival of the self has dealt with a predetermined view on the one end and the other perspective of the evolutionary dynamics of the self-other extreme. Through this autobiography, Angelou takes us to different avenues in the formation and perception of her identity. Racial identity and cultural differences are the major issues addressed in this study. The main idea is to see her as a great individual in the community rather than an outsider. The individual may judge herself based on her origin to create her own identity with a black racial experience. As a black woman, she has to emerge as an individual, perhaps the most traumatic and tragic one. The quest which begins after the consciousness of individual identity, ends with the protagonist becoming a standard person, like an ambassador of an American experience. Maya Angelou’s autobiography is more than it. It is a spiritual and psychological journey of self-discovery and identity. Through her experiences of racial discrimination, gender bias, trauma, and eventual empowerment, Angelou portrays her personal quest to understand ‘who she is’ as a black woman in a prejudiced society. Her voice for freedom and dignity, the caged bird, is a powerful metaphor for the author’s own life. Her soul is confined by racism, sexism, and personal suffering. Yet, it still sings for freedom and self-expression. She begins her life feeling both displaced and rejected. As a child, she and her brother Bailey are sent to their

grandmother’s house in Stamps, Arkansas, by train alone. The separation from her parents creates in her a deep sense of abandonment, and her personality is damaged by the racism of Southern society. She feels invisible and inferior because she is Black. Segregation reflects the identity confusion that many African Americans faced during segregation—a conflict between how they saw themselves and how society viewed them.

Another important issue is that of racism and social injustice. Racism plays a key role in Maya’s identity crisis in the novel. The people of Stamps live under harsh racial boundaries where black people are treated as second-grade citizens. Maya experiences that even education is controlled by white authorities on graduation day. This racism develops inner strength and moral resilience in her life to prove her identity and worth. When Maya is raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, her trauma leads to silence, and she does not speak for many years. Her silence becomes symbolic of the “caged bird” trapped by fear, guilt, and shame, and in silence, she defeats her enemy. Her rediscovery of her voice is only possible when she is introduced to literature by Mrs. Bertha Flowers and understands that ‘language is power’. Maya Angelou grows as self – reliant. She leaps that identity is not fixed but is created through courage, resilience, and self-respect.

By the end of the autobiography, Maya becomes a mother, and instead of fear, she feels a new sense of purpose and wholeness to prove her emotional and personal identity. Her journey from insecurity to confidence mirrors the African American struggle for identity and the feminist quest for self-definition.

Review of Literature

Recent scholarship on Maya Angelou has examined her autobiography through the lenses of feminist criticism, trauma studies, and African American cultural identity. Critics such as Joanne Braxton have emphasised Angelou’s narrative voice as a tool of resistance, while Patricia Hill Collins has highlighted the intersection of race and gender in Black women’s identity formation. However, much of the existing literature treats trauma, race, and gender as isolated concerns rather than interconnected processes that shape identity. This

study synthesises these perspectives by focusing on how silence, suffering, and self-expression collectively contribute to Angelou's evolving sense of self, thereby addressing the gap in integrative identity-based analyses.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis method, which is appropriate for literary research that seeks interpretative depth rather than empirical measurement. The analysis is guided by feminist literary criticism, trauma theory, and African American cultural studies, enabling an interdisciplinary understanding of the identity formation. A close reading of selected episodes from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is supported by secondary scholarly sources to contextualise Angelou's experiences within broader social and psychological frameworks of trauma.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary critical approach, combining feminist, psychological, and racial identity frameworks to examine the character development and thematic progression within the autobiography.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is confined to Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. This does not extend to her later autobiographical works. The analysis focuses on themes of identity formation, trauma, silence, racial oppression, and self-empowerment as represented in the text.

Contribution of the Study

This paper contributes to the existing literary discourse by presenting identity as a process shaped by trauma, resistance, and self-expression rather than as a static category. By integrating psychological trauma with feminist and racial perspectives, this study offers a holistic interpretation of Angelou's autobiography and highlights its

relevance to contemporary discussions on identity, marginalisation, and empowerment.

Conclusion

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings represents a transformative journey from silence to speech and marginalization to self-assertion. This study demonstrates that Angelou's identity was forged through resilience, education, and self-expression in response to racial and gender-based oppression. These findings align with the abstract's emphasis on identity as an evolving process shaped by trauma and empowerment. Future research may extend this study by comparing Angelou's later autobiographies, exploring intergenerational identity narratives, or applying trauma theory to African American autobiographical texts.

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