

## RE-CONCEPTUALIZING WOMEN'S VOICE IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to show how females writers conceptualize their voices through their autobiographies. The conceptual framework for the study would be feminism theory in general and Nancy Hartsock's feminist standpoint theory in particular. Its socially constructed phenomenon, that who has right to speak and who has to remain silent. Autobiographies have explanatory and evaluative frameworks in which events, people, and places are interconnected in terms of motivations, intentions, and psychological states. Our self-created stories or autobiographies determine our relation to others in time and space. Feminist theorists of autobiography raise the question about rights of women's writings. They try to find out the relation of voice and silence within concepts of place and power. One can has power through place and voice can be emerged through power only. Hence, this paper focuses on the elements of autobiography in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing* to find the relationship between voice and silence in the sphere of power and place

**Key Words:** Autobiography, Feminist Standpoint theory, voice and silence, Power, Place

### I- Introduction

The issue of the voice answers very important theoretical questions: who speaks for whom and whose voices are being listened to. Raising the question of voice in 'Can the Subaltern Speak'? Spivak (1988) tries to find out ways to listen to the silenced voices of subaltern women. Generally speaking, we are what we tell about ourselves (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001). We create structure and meaning in our lives by narrating our experiences to others (Fivush, 2008; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Autobiography has its roots in antiquity. Autobiography is particularly based on the narrator's memory. Feminist theorists of autobiography raise the question about the rights of women's writings. They try to find out the relation of voice and silence within the concepts of place and power. The place allows power and power in turn guarantees voice (Braham, 1995; Fivush, 2000, 2004; Rosser & Miller, 2000; Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Being a part of a particular gender, class, and race determines access to some aspects of experiences (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Harding, 1993). Our place determines our experiences and also whether we can communicate our experiences to others or not (Fivush & Marin, 2007). Roles in society are very important in determining power that allows shaping socially accepted narratives. The reader identifies with Maya Angelou as she employs the first person, typical of autobiographical writing. Female voices from Africa have long been ignored. They got attention in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A historian Marcia Wright analyzed narratives of three women in *Women in Peril: A Commentary on the Life Stories of Captives in Nineteenth-Century East-Central Africa*. In the *Testament*, she included life stories of *Narwimba* (1850), *Chisi* (1890), and *Meli* (1870). In 1983 Claire, Robertson, and Martin A.

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Klein, included the studies discussed by Wright and Edward Alpers in the journal *Women and Slavery in Africa*. Wright and Alpers analyzed narrated autobiographies of *Bwanikwa (1886-1911)* in *Bwanikwa: Consciousness and Protest among Slave Women in Central Africa* and *The Story of Swema: A Note on Female Vulnerability in Nineteenth-Century East Africa* respectively. On the other hand in *Autobiography of Swema*, Alper (1983) revealed the history of 'production of slaves for the market' (p.186). Margaret Strobel discussed the story of Swahili from the eastern coast in *Slavery and Reproductive Labor in Mombasa* while Robertson analyzed the story of Ga from Western coast in *Post-Proclamation Slavery in Accra: A Female Affair*.

Harriet Jacobs's autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* in 1887 caught the attention of readers. She not only experienced as well as exposed the brutality and oppression of slavery. She also told about her struggle to get economic and personal freedom. Erma Calderon and Annie Mae Hunt, two Afro-American women, presented racism, the violence of white and black men and effects of Civil Rights Movements (1946–1968) on African Women in their autobiographies named: *Erma, A Black Woman Remembers, 1912- 1980* and *I Am Annie Mae (1983)*. Their life situations were different but both of them felt the oppression and influence of the Civil Rights Movements differently. The civil Right Movement started in 1946 to improve the life style and to secure the social, economical, and political right of African Americans. This struggle started in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by demanding the elimination of racial injustice (Newman, 2002). During Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln finally issued the Emancipation Proclamation by codifying the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment that outlawed the institution of slavery. But abolition of slavery followed by Jim Crow Segregation arouse in South (Woodward & McFeely, 2002).. According to this segregation Southern Black would remain in poverty and inequality and dominated by White Masters (Ayers 2007).

Angelou is known as a poet, teacher and as a lecturer also. She has taught at the University of California, University of Kansas, and University of Ghana. She has been honoured from Rockefeller Foundation Scholar and a Yale University Fellow. She has not only taught in United States and Europe but also in Africa and Middle East. She worked as editor for *African Review*. Angelou served as northern coordinator of Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She also worked as actor in the televised him version of Alex Haley's *Roots*. Maya Angelou was also actively participated in Civil Rights Movement and she worked with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. . She is no doubted a first well known Afro-American autobiographer. Angelou wrote seven autobiographies. *I know why the caged bird sings (1970)* is followed by *Gather Together in My Name (1974)*, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas (1976)*, *The Heart of a Woman (1981)*, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986)*, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven (2002)*, and *Mom & Me & Mom (2013)*. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Angelou reveals her account of the black female's victimization by powerlessness and prejudice. In her autobiography she presented her traumatic memories of childhood after the separation of her parents. She also discussed the issues of race, gender, identity, and voice, etc.

## II- Methodology

### Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory (Alcoff & Potter, Harding, 1993, Haraway, 1988) was presented by Nancy Hartsock. In *Money, Sex, and Power: Towards a Feminist Historical Materialism (1985)*, Nancy Hartsock has used the historical materialistic approach of Karl Marx for the understanding of Feminist Standpoint theory. She draws a distinctive line between men's and women's life activities. Men have to produce goods only but women have to produce goods as well as human beings:

[I]f life itself consists of sensuous activity, the vantage point available to women based on their contribution to subsistence represents an intensification and deepening of the materialist world view available to the producers of commodities in capitalism, an intensification of class consciousness. (Hartsock, 1985, p. 235)

The main postulates of standpoint theory presented by Hartsock (1985) are as follows:

- i- Social relations are structured by material life (like a class position in Marxist theory).
- ii- Two different groups (ruling & oppressed) emerge from opposite forces of material life and due to dominancy, the vision of rulers will always be partial and perverse. Later Hartsock explained 'perverse' as "both strange and harmful" (p. 231).
- iii- The vision of the ruling class or gender (patriarchal) cannot be dismissed as false because it structures the material life in which both groups have to participate.
- iv- Therefore oppressed group's vision (feminist) is engaged and it must be struggled for availability and has to represent reality beneath the surface.
- v- The standpoint of oppressed reveals the inhumanity of human relations.

All these postulates can be seen in a pictorial form in figure (3.1). It is important to know about the female's standpoint because "[It] is distress that requires a solution ... a social synthesis that does not depend on any of the forms taken by abstract masculinity" (p. 246). Based upon Hegel's account of master/slave relation, Marxism, and Lukacs' idea of the standpoint of the proletariat, This theory of political activism emerged from second-wave feminism. The feminist standpoint theorists claim that the 'double vision' experienced by the group of marginality offers them epistemic benefit.

Feminist standpoint theorists (Harrsock 1983, Harding 1986, Smith 1987, Jaggar 1989, Collins 2002) pave a logical way for the feminist standpoint. Harding (1993) claims that, "Starting off research from women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order" (p. 56). According to these theorists, feminist standpoint is not merely a perspective of a woman, but also it is a perspective of women gained through a socio-historical position. The dominated group has power to express its perspective while the subordinate group has to do struggle to share and express its standpoints. In general, this theory promotes the investigation of women's standpoints (perspectives) and lived experiences in their own voices (Lather, 1992; Olesen, 2005; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). The Relation between Knowledge, Place and Power and Concept of Voice and Silence

Feminist Standpoint Theory deals with the relation of power and knowledge interlinked to experiences and illustrates that through power one can make visible the experiences of women (Anderson, 2011; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Some feminist scholars (Haraway, 2004; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 2004) disagree with some canons of this theory although these scholars have the same target of attempting to add to the knowledge of women's experiences (Olesen, 2005). Feminist Standpoint Theory came forward by the exclusive societal context of women's relationships with power (Bertsch, 2012; Olesen, 2005; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002) that women must tell their stories while keeping in view "the perspective of the dominant class (e.g., White, male, wealth)" (Nielsen, 1990, p. 10). As stated by Crasnow (2009), "As a methodology, standpoint theory provides both a means of uncovering the power relations that create such silence and of creating the trust necessary to access informants' evidence" (p.191). According to Olesen (2015), an Associate Professor of Political Science, Aarhus University, Denmark He has contributed widely to the fields of social movements and global sociology in journals such as Mobilization, Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change, and International Political Sociology.

“Research and writing by sociologist Dorothy Smith, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, political scientist Nancy Hartsock, and philosopher Sandra Harding dissolved the concept of essentialized, universalized woman, which was to be replaced by the ideas of a situated woman with experiences and knowledge specific to her place in the material division of labor and racial stratification systems”. (p. 243)

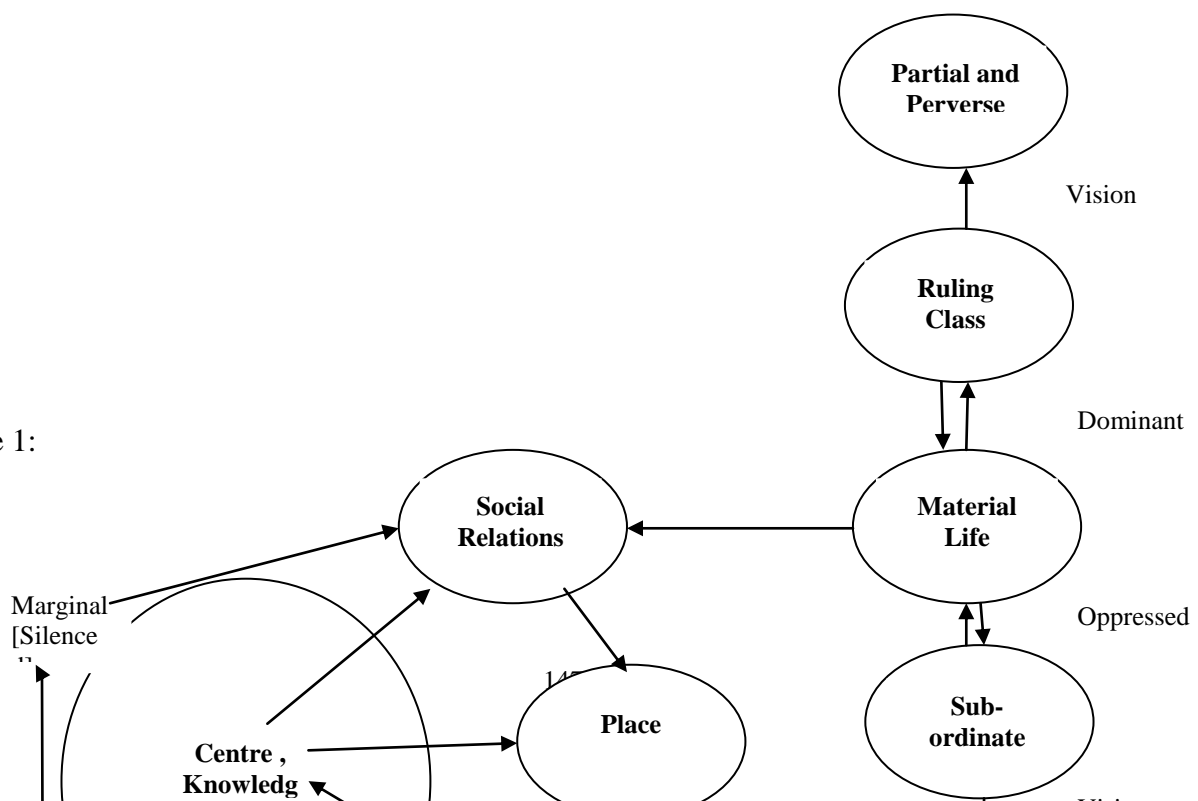
There are different subgroups in the gender group ‘women’ and have diverse experiences in different social contexts. So, it creates a ‘concrete multiplicity’ of standpoints among women (Harding, 1993, p. 56).

The concept of voice and silence emerges from place and power (Belenky, Clinchey, Goldberg & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). In the feminist concept of place, silence and voice are dynamic and relational because they emerge within the individual as a result of interactions with others. The autobiographical life story is also dependent on the way through which an individual develops voice or silence (Fivush, 2002).

“Experiences that are voiced provide a sense of validation; experiences are accepted as real and the individual’s perspective on the experience is viewed as appropriate. Experiences that are silenced lead to a sense of existential despair; experiences are not heard or the individual’s perspective on the experience is not accepted as appropriate”. (p. 8)

On the other hand, from a feminist view of power, voice only emerges through the power.

Figure 1:



The concept also raises the question of the narrator's authority. There arises a question of whether the narrator's voice is cooperative or coerced, is the narrator's voice is free or someone imposes him/her to tell the story? Therefore, power can be expressed as a source of silence or voice also. Autobiographies are very important in conceptualizing the link between knowledge, place, power, and the concept of voice and silence. Personal experiences of narrators are represented in autobiographical memories. By the analysis of these experiences, it can be determined that which experiences are being given a voice and which experiences are being silenced by force or voluntarily.

### III- Analysis

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is full of traumatic memories of the author, encompasses the life span of Angelou from 3 years to 17 years. A story of hurt, loneliness, anger, and love, it starts with the incident of separation of Angelou's parents, when Angelou and her elder brother Bailey were sent to their grandmother's home in Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou (1970) described her experience in Stamps as follows:

In Stamps, the separation was so complete that blackest children did not 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 ragged against the well dressed. (p. 25)

*In the autobiography, it is mentioned that the American community was divided into two strata based on material life. White community (both males and females) and male members of the Black come under the category of the dominant or ruling class while Black females come under the oppressed and subordinate class. Angelou (1970) observes that she was*

*white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil (p. 9).*

*The White vision seems to be partial and perverse here. They used to cut jokes and insult the Black community such as in the incident of the graduation ceremony, remarks of Donleavy hurt Angelou a lot. She observes in her autobiography (1970):*

Donleavy had exposed us. We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous.... 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' (pp.151 -152).

Angelou has a bitter memory of her grandmother being mocked by 'powhitetrash' girls. Mrs. Handerson (Angelou's grandmother) was respected by the all-Black community in Stamps, but those girls humiliated her when her grandmother introduced herself as Mrs. Handerson. They were used to call Negroes nigger, crows, boots, and spooks (Jayawardena, 2016). Angelou was too much



disturbed and scared of those white girls. She was angry also because her grandmother still respected them and did not say a single word:

I burst. A firecracker July-the-Fourth burst. How could Momma call them Miz? The mean nasty things. Why couldn't she have come inside the sweet, cool store when we saw them breasting the hill? What did she prove? And then if they were dirty, mean and impudent, why did Momma have to call them Miz? (p. 26)

Material life determines the social status or relations of a person. The black community lived in Stamps, Arkansas in South America, in the marginal place in society with white people in the center. Hence, they had no power to express their feelings, knowledge, and point of view to others, women were doubly oppressed by the White community and Black Men. The rape scene is the climax of the autobiography: Angelou was raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. This incident is also evidence of traumatic memories and she got mute for the next six years of her life as a result of the oppression by Black males of the community. She recalled her rape as, "a breaking ... when even the senses are torn apart" (p. 65). In the courtroom, the defense prosecutor (male) investigated her very illogically "as though I had raped Mr. Freeman" (p. 70). Angelou's experiences show oppression by the political institution as well as by the institution of the family: "My uncles would kill me and Grandmother Baxter would stop speaking ... And all those people in the court would stone me as they had stoned the harlot in the Bible" (Angelou, 1970, pp. 70-71). Angelou's autobiography is an attempt to counter oppression black women have to face. Braxton (1999) quotes Angelou:

In the eyes of the predominantly white and male culture, women, and particularly black women, speak as "others," ... [i.e.] the black woman speaks from a position of marginality. And yet, against all odds, she comes to self-awareness and finds herself at the center of her own experience. Veiled though she might be (even twice veiled, thrice if she should be a member of a sexual minority), the black woman autobiographer possesses her self-conscious vision of herself and her community. (p.4)

Angelou wrote down her true story and tried to present the real picture of a Black girl living in South America and search of identity. All the incidents of the book reflect the stereotypical image of a black girl and she struggled to avoid that image and at last, succeeded. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* starts with the church scene showing the embarrassing situation of a Negro Black girl. She said, 'The age-faded color made my skin look dirty like mud, and everyone in church was looking at my skinny legs' (p. 2).

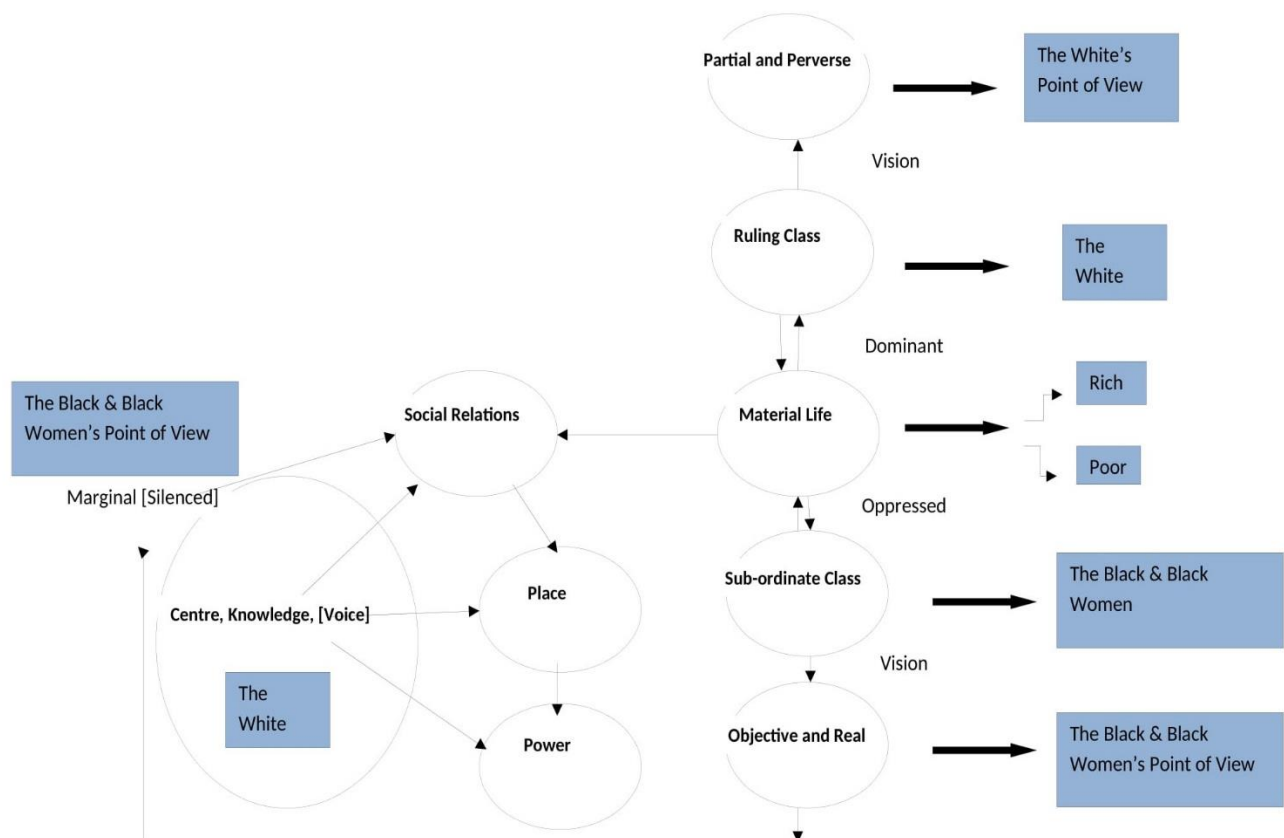
In the first chapter, Angelou stated that after the separation of her parents, they sent her and Bailey with the tags in their hand, 'To Whom It May Concern' (p. 5). It is a big question for human identity; they traveled with tags like luggage on the train. After that, there were a series of incidents that show her family's struggle against racism and for identity. In chapter 3, her uncle Willie had to hide himself to avoid the raid of the Klan ride. She said, "My uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings; it was too humiliating to hear" (p. 14). She also recalled that she and her brother could not even memorize text from Shakespeare because he was white and their grandmother did not like all that. Her grandmother encouraged them to learn the texts of Black writers. She noted in the autobiography, "We realized that Momma would question us about the author and that we'd have to tell her that Shakespeare was white, and it wouldn't matter to her whether he was dead or not" (p. 11).

Angelou's fourth chapter describes the difference of the South from the North of America, "between the unknowing majority (it) and the knowing minority (you)" (p.20). The fifth chapter includes the incident of White girls. Angelou describes the white girls with racial prejudice that she learned from the whites: "The dirt of [their] cotton dresses continued on their legs, feet, arms, and faces to make them all of a piece" (p. 25). Their jeering at her grandmother, Mrs. Henderson, shattered Angelou from within and inspired in her severe hatred for White girls.

This autobiography is a journey of identity: Angelou traveled from childhood, ashamed of being a Negro girl, and at last, she restored her identity as a Negro young lady with the birth of her

child, Mrs Flower, and recovered her pride in her Black identity. Mrs. Flower made her proud of what she is. Her respect for Angelou gave her confidence to restore her voice. She admired Mrs. Flowers as, “I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected . . . for just being Marguerite Johnson . . . she had made tea cookies for me and read to me from her favorite book” (p. 85).

Figure 2:



Angelou mentioned that different people used different names for the character of Maya: Ritie, Maya, Marguerite, Margaret, Mary, and Sister. These names indicate various identities of Angelou (Walker, 1999). Once she quarreled with her employer (Mrs. Cullinan) because she was not used to calling her name. Angelou broke her dishes and at last, she compelled that lady to call her by her name. At last, Mrs. Cullinan shouted, “Her name's Margaret, goddamn it, her name's Margaret!” (p. 93). At the end of the autobiography, she had been transformed into a confident Black young lady. According to Braxton (1999), “black women autobiographers liberate themselves from stereotyped views of black womanhood and define their own experiences” (p. 128). Sexual identity is the main theme of the last two chapters of the autobiography in which Angelou is more concerned with her sexual identity and the birth of her son ‘Guy’. In the end, she grows into a proud and buoyant Black lady: “I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race” (p. 156). She was not embarrassed anymore of being a Black lady; she had become a proud mother of a Black fatherless child. And she also wanted to make him a confident member of the Black community.

The autobiography presents two voices: the childhood girl, Maya, and the mature woman, Angelou (Braxton, 1999). In an interview with Tate, Angelou analyzes her creative experience:

I have to be so internal, and yet while writing, I have to be apart from the story so that I don't fall into indulgence. Whenever I speak about the books, I always think in terms of the Maya character ... so as not to mean me. It's damned difficult for me to preserve this distancing. But it's very necessary. (Tate, 1983, p. 3)

Her mother was a good Christian and she used to pray in the morning and evening. She always prayed for the tongue which could not hurt any person, "Help me to put a bridle on my tongue" (p. 5), an implied presentation of silence. After getting raped by Mr Freeman, she remained silent for a long time. She felt guilty for the murder of a person, 'She felt guilty for the murder of a person, 'A man was dead because I lied (p.72). Gilbert (1999) observes that

She suffers guilt for having caused the man's death and the separation of her brother from the mother he adores. For a year she retreats to silence, one of the most terrible of the "Silences" that women writers have described. (p.101)

This silence is very symbolic of the autobiography. It indicates that both rape and definition of pure White beauty were two main hindrances in the expressions of a Black woman. Mr. Freeman tortured her physically and mentally,

I could feel the evilness flowing through my body and waiting, pent up, to rush off my tongue if I tried to open my mouth. I clamped my teeth shut, I'd hold it in. If it escaped, wouldn't it flood the world and all the innocent people? (p. 72)

Finally, she emerged from that silenced period with the help of her grandmother and Mrs. Flowers. Mrs. Flowers read some books for her and asked Angelou to read some other books also. Mrs. Flowers told Maya,

Language is man's way of communicating with his fellow men and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals ... Words mean more than what is set down on paper.

It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning. (p. 82)

Angelou's voice can listen in the autobiography, "We [the Negro race] survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians, and blues singers)" (p. 156). The text is mono vocal and she uses the singular pronoun for the whole Black community. In an interview with Plimpton (1992), Angelou explained, "I'm using the first-person singular and trying to make that the first-person plural (...) it's a large, ambitious dream. But I love the form (p. 184). In her autobiography, she presented the voices of all Black women and tried to give them a central position in society.

#### **IV-Conclusion**

The study finally concludes that Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is full of traumas and struggles of Angelou to overcome traumatic memories. Angelou raises her voice to show her identity as a Black Negro Woman. At the beginning of the autobiography, she does not seem satisfied with her identity but till the end, she is quite satisfied and proud of that. She presents her Black body as a site of traumatic emotions and feelings. Angelou was suppressed by the White community (both males and females) and Black males also. The very opening scene of her autobiography shows how White children embarrassed her. The insult of her grandmother by 'powhitetrash' white girls, hiding of her uncle from white boys, and her rape by the boyfriend of her mother are some examples of her suppression. The autobiography ends with the birth of her fatherless child. She said, '[f]rom disappointments I gradually ascended the emotional ladder of haughty indignation and finally to that state of stubbornness where the mind is locked like the jaws of an enraged bulldog' (p. 266). She was a Black girl and she had to pay for that in different ways. There are also some indications of scriptotherapy. She was a very literary child of famous English writers like Shakespeare, Kipling, etc. and after the terrible silence, she regained her voice through her literary stories and poems.

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