
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: The Journey to Freedom and Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Maya Angelou's memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), demonstrates the transformative power of resistance and the complexities of being a Black woman in a racially oppressive society. This paper delves into Angelou's narrative, examining how she portrays the complexities and intersections of race and gender and their impact on Black women's lives. The study also explores the various forms of resistance employed by Angelou and other Black women depicted in the memoir through the Black feminist perspectives of Patricia Hill Collins. This perspective provides a lens through which to thoroughly examine the themes of racism, sexism, identity, and resilience central to Angelou's work. Collins' perspectives offer a critical and intersectional analysis of Black women's unique perspectives, experiences, and struggles. This study argues that Angelou's acts of defiance, ranging from self-expression through literature and poetry to the pursuit of education and the strength found in the community, lead to personal growth, empowerment, and liberation. The findings of this research highlight Angelou's self-determination, acts of defiance and resistance, self-expression, and collective solidarity in the ongoing struggle against intersectional oppression and the impact on her journey of empowerment, self-healing, and liberation to become a voice that supports others' freedom.

KEYWORDS

Black Feminism, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Intersectionality, Maya Angelou, Memoir, Patricia Hill Collins

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1. Introduction

"There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you. You have all heard of the Spartan youth with the fox under his clock" (Hurston, *Dust*, 1942/2006, p. 154).

As the forerunner Zora Neale Hurston implies that the beast that killed that boy should be released, sharing the tale that one holds inside to live fully, the phenomenal Maya Angelou (1928-2014) responds brilliantly to this memorable saying and decides to deal with that agony and tell her story. Her autobiographical series, starting with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), chronicles her personal experiences, addressing broader themes of racism, identity, resilience, and defiance, resonating with readers across generations, reflecting the collective suffering, struggles, and triumphs of Black women, and positioning her as a critical and pioneering voice in the narrative of American culture. By boldly confronting issues of race, gender, and trauma, she paved the way for subsequent generations of writers, inspiring more inclusive literary works that honor diverse perspectives. Moreover, her legacy extends beyond literature as a civil rights activist and cultural ambassador, encouraging social justice and equality movements, marking her as a beacon of hope and empowerment in the ongoing pursuit of freedom and dignity.

Maya Angelou's memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, first published in 1969 when she was in her early forties, stands as a powerful testament to the transformative power of resistance and the complexities of being a Black woman in a racist society.

Her memoir was one of the first autobiographies by a Black woman to reach a broad audience, offering an unflinching portrayal of her struggles, including racism, trauma, and the search for identity. The memoir is significant not only for its unbiased exploration of these themes but also for its lyrical prose and the way it weaves together personal and collective histories, making Angelou's experiences universally relatable. Unlike many other works of the time, which often simplified the experiences of Black individuals, Angelou's narrative embraces complexity and vulnerability, providing a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit. The secret of such enormous appeal to American readers, whether white or Black, according to Harold Bloom, is her "remarkable literary voice [that] speaks to something in the universal American 'little me within the big me'" (2009, p.1-2) Whatever their race or ethnic origin, those readers, as Bloom cites, "share the sense that experience, however terrible, can be endured because their deepest self is beyond experience and so cannot be destroyed" (p.2). This autobiographical prose, according to him, is the centerpiece of Angelou's achievement. Likewise, Wagner-Martin (2021) adds that this memoir was a huge success, becoming a best-seller translated into many languages marked by Angelou's unique methods. In the late 1960s and 1970s, as Wagner-Martin states, there was "very little interest in books about marital or domestic strife [...] The term hardly existed [and] publishers had not recognized the need for book categories based on skin color, gender, or politics" (pp. 3-4). Thus, Angelou pioneered in creating that voice and form of self-writing.

The memoir chronicles her formative years from her early childhood in Stamps, Arkansas, to her teenage years in San Francisco, reflecting the struggles and triumphs of her own life, intertwining her narrative with the different experiences of other Black women in the United States of America. It was set predominantly in the 1930s and 1940s, a period marked by the harsh realities of racism that spread widely in every aspect of society, as well as the Jim Crow laws. These laws legislated racial segregation, such as the one found in trains, which stated that passengers should have equal seats. Still, African Americans should be seated in specific areas away from the white ones (Megna-Wallace, 1998). Growing up in the segregated Southern United States, the memoir captures the complexities of Angelou's identity formation, exploring the intersections of race and gender and their profound impact on her experiences and sense of self. Against this backdrop of oppression and adversity, Angelou's memoir presents a compelling narrative of resistance, revealing a stream of acts of defiance employed by Angelou and the other Black women depicted in the memoir. These acts of resistance take various forms, from the power of self-expression through literature and poetry to the pursuit of education and the solidarity and strength found in the community.

By closely examining these different forms of resistance and intersectionality, this research paper seeks to illuminate their significance and reveal their transformative effects on Black women's lives. The study probes the narrative of Angelou's first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, from the Black feminist perspective, addressing the following questions: How does Maya Angelou's memoir portray the complexities of being a Black woman in a racist society, considering the intersections of race and gender? What are the different forms of resistance depicted in the memoir? This study attempts to answer these questions by examining how Maya Angelou portrays and explores various forms of resistance employed by her and other Black women in the face of a deeply oppressive society. Thus, this study argues that this memoir demonstrates the transformative power of resistance as Maya Angelou's acts of defiance lead to personal growth, empowerment, self-healing, and liberation. The significance of this research lies in its exploration of the transformative power of resistance, as exemplified in Angelou's memoir. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on Black feminist literature, gaining deeper insights into the complexities of being a Black woman in a racist society, highlighting the significance of Angelou's self-determination and self-expression, and unraveling the transformative power of defiance and its impact on her personal growth, empowerment, and liberation.

2. Literature Review

Many scholars have extensively studied and analyzed Maya Angelou's memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, offering valuable insights into various themes and perspectives. For instance, some studies focused on the themes and some on the identity crisis, while others studied the effects of trauma evident in the memoir. This literature review will examine these studies and their contributions to the issues discussed.

Identity is a profound issue in the literature of African Americans and Maya Angelou's memoir specifically. Choudhry and Asif (2013) shed light on the complexities of identity formation and power dynamics in the context of women of color in the diaspora. Their study concluded that Angelou's autobiography challenges essentialist notions of 'Blackness' and 'femininity' by unveiling the complex, fluid, and variable diasporic identities of Black American women, which are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, class, and state ideologies. Similarly, the identity crisis was examined by Dongxu (2018), who delved into Maya Angelou's process of identity formation, focusing on two key aspects: the loss of identity and the confirmation of identity. Dongxu inferred that Angelou's memoir powerfully depicts the journey of a young Black woman's identity construction, where she overcomes the challenges of losing her identity due to abandonment and social constraints, ultimately finding and affirming her sense of self through the influence of her grandmother and the empowering experiences of her community.

Trauma also plays an essential role in Angelou's memoir. Munir and Sheikh's study (2020), for instance, examined Angelou's memoir as a powerful example of resistance literature that explores the effects of racism and patriarchy on the traumatic experiences of Black women. They highlighted the resistance and courage demonstrated by Black women against the process of 'double colonization' resulting from racism and male prejudice, leading to mental trauma and negatively affecting the well-being of Black women. Henke (2005) also discussed trauma and argued that Angelou's memoir is an act of narrative reformulation to

address childhood sexual trauma and the quest for self-healing. By examining Angelou's re-creation of her child-self as Marguerite Johnson, the study brought attention to the poignant and traumatic nature of childhood sexual abuse. Henke assumed that through symbolic reintegration into the African American community, Angelou could overcome the debilitating effects of trauma and emerge as a spiritually empowered and psychologically liberated African American woman.

In addition to the previously discussed topics, themes are significant aspects studied in Angelou's memoir. Zaini and Khan (2021) focused on alienation, highlighting Angelou's struggle for recognition, self-awareness, and liberation from social norms and values, addressing the challenges of racism, sexism, and the identity crisis Maya Angelou faced. Zaini and Khan argued that through her depiction of injustices and her personal growth, Angelou becomes a symbol of resilience, challenging the oppression and injustice faced by the Black community while ushering in a new era for the feminist movement. Similarly, Arensberg's study (1976) focused on rootlessness, death, and self-assertion themes. The study noted that through her autobiographical work, Angelou powerfully depicts her personal journey of overcoming social and emotional adversity to emerge as a tenacious and vital individual who asserts her identity and life-affirming womanhood. Nero's study (2005) shed light on themes of community, education, and language. The study acknowledged the transformative power of language and education in Angelou's life. It uncovers how language became a medium for establishing Angelou's identity and self-worth, bringing dignity, hope, and pride to the African American community. The study concluded that Angelou's writing transcends boundaries of race, gender, class, and culture, powerfully depicting her personal journey and the enduring strength of the human spirit while highlighting the transformative power of community, education, and language in affirming Black identity and heritage. In addition, Bloom (2009) edited a dozen essayists sharing their pride in Maya Angelou as an exemplary autobiographer of the social struggle and advocate of human rights. However, not much was given to the formal analysis of the work, as he states (p. vii).

Previous studies have offered valuable insights into Maya Angelou's themes, trauma, and identity, highlighting the transformative power of writing, personal narratives and identity, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory. However, the literature review reveals a knowledge gap in the exploration of the role of resistance and intersectionality in Angelou's memoir, examining how she withstands oppression and addresses the complexities of being a Black woman in a racist society. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the transformative power of resistance as represented in Maya Angelou's memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The findings of this research highlight Angelou's journey of self-determination, self-expression, and community solidarity in the fight against oppression and the journey of self-healing through the lens of Black feminist theory.

3. Methodology

This study examines Maya Angelou's memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* from the Black feminist perspectives grounded in Patricia Hill Collins' book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, first published in 1990. This foundational book provides a critical and intersectional analysis of Black women's unique perspectives, experiences, and struggles. The Black feminist theory discussed in Collins' work examines the intersections of race, gender, class, and other social identities and how they shape the lived experiences of Black women. Key concepts such as intersectionality and intersectional invisibility are crucial to this approach, as they highlight how the experiences of Black women are often overlooked or marginalized within dominant narratives. Collins emphasizes that the purpose of Black feminist thought is "namely, fostering *both* Black women's empowerment *and* conditions of social justice" (Collins, 2000, p. x). Collins stresses the importance of Black feminist thought in stimulating a new consciousness and creating a collective identity among African-American women, offering them a different view of themselves and their worlds. Collins states that "Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More importantly, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance" (p.32).

This theoretical framework is appropriate for analyzing Maya Angelou's memoir since she is one of the Black women intellectuals central to Black feminist thought whose experiences, according to Collins, "provide us with a unique angle of vision concerning Black womanhood unavailable to other groups [...] as members of an oppressed group, to have critical insights into the condition of our oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures" (2000, p. 35). This perspective provides a lens through which to thoroughly examine the themes of racism, sexism, identity, and resilience central to Angelou's work. Applying a Black feminist perspective allows for a nuanced and empowered interpretation of Angelou's groundbreaking autobiographical narrative. A close reading of the memoir will be conducted to identify key themes and narratives related to race, gender, and the Black feminist perspective. The findings from the data analysis will be synthesized and used to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Maya Angelou's memoir contributes to the ongoing discussions of Black women's experiences.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Maya Angelou was one of the diverse, rich, and influential voices representing Black women's thoughts of the long-standing African American women's intellectual community. Such thought, according to Collins, "reflect women's efforts to come to terms with lived experiences within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and religion" (2000, p.9). Part of their struggle in the tradition of Black women writers, as Collins elaborates, is "to express their totality of self [...] to find their voice to express their collective, self-defined Black woman's standpoint," reconciling the contradiction separating the internally defined images of self with the "objectification as the Other" (p.99). She adds that "the journey from victimization

and internalized oppression to “the “free mind” of a self-defined womanist consciousness has been a prominent theme in the works of US Black women writers” (p.112). Thus, in her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou portrays her experience with these intersecting oppressions.

Through her personal narrative, Angelou illuminates how race and gender shaped her lived experiences and sense of identity. Her memoir demonstrates how the complex interplay of these factors profoundly impacted her childhood, her interactions with the broader community, and her journey toward healing and self-acceptance. Her memoir provides an emotional exploration of intersectionality issues. These issues include what Angelou describes as being “assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power” (Angelou, 2015, p.268). Growing up in that segregated community, Angelou faced oppression and discrimination on multiple levels. From the very beginning, she was unwillingly sent to live with her grandmother because of her parents' divorce, which hugely contributed to her childhood identity crisis. Since childhood plays a vital role in constructing a person's character, it becomes evident that Angelou's identity issues resulted from her constant feeling of being neglected by her parents after their divorce when she was three years old. She describes that painful displacement, saying, “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat” (p.6). Being aware of that displacement engulfed her pain and trauma.

As Kernberg et al. (2000) explain, the concept of identity is “central to personality and its disorders” and to normal adolescent development, stressing the fact that the integrated healthy personal identity results from the recognition and acceptance of the person in his/her community (pp.22-23). Such factors reveal the reason behind Angelou's troubled childhood. Since she moved to Stamps, Arkansas, Maya was troubled by the sinister racism and segregation in America. As a child, she did not believe that white people existed. The segregation she witnessed in Stamps “was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like,” a fact that made her feel detested on both familial and social levels (Angelou, 2015, p.25). Nasty white children also used to mock her grandmother in her Store. Education and schools witnessed overt racism and segregation. White students, as Angelou stated, had the chance to be scientists, while the blacks had to be basketball players; the girls were not even on that agenda. The offensive white speaker who attended her class graduation in 1940 mentioned that the Central School (of the whites) had been granted improvements, while the Central High School (of the Blacks) was ignored in the general betterment scheme (p. 176).

Another prominent example of society's hatred of Black people is Angelou's treatment by the white dentist who refused to treat her due to the color of her skin. Dr. Lincoln bluntly stated that he did not treat Black patients, saying he would “rather stick his hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's,” though her grandmother owed him a favor when he borrowed money from her to save his building and job (Angelou, 2015, p.186). As a reaction to this humiliating experience, Angelou imagined Momma as a hero who forbids the dentist from working in Stamps. This potent fantasy reflects Angelou's desperation for justice and dignity in the face of racism. This experience sheds light on the dehumanizing effects of white supremacy and how it strips marginalized individuals of their dignity. For a very young girl suffering from physical pain, what seemed unfair was “to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness” (p.185). Through this incident, Angelou underscores how even the most fundamental acts of self-care were compromised by the all-encompassing nature of anti-Black discrimination.

Another aspect of intersectionality in the book is Angelou's examination of the intersection between sexuality, trauma, and resilience. Her experience with sexual abuse when her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, sexually molested and then raped her, and the subsequent impact on her self-perception and relationships, demonstrate how different aspects of identity and lived experiences can intersect and shape an individual's journey. She describes that shattering pain as “the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body” (Angelou, 2015, p.77). As Angelou stated, the rape of a child is awful and the ‘cruellest action’ since many people who have been raped quite often go on to violate themselves, their families, lovers, the community, and society. She admitted, “I can say honestly that I don't believe a day that I haven't thought about it, in something I do, in my own sexuality, in my own practices” (as cited in Wagner-Martin, 2021 pp. 27-28). Angelou decided to write about rape and all those black men who talk about nation-building, then “go home to rape their nieces and step-daughters and all the little teenage girls [...] to tell it because rape and incest are rife in the black community” (as cited in Wagner-Martin, 2021, p.18). This reveals the enduring impact the rape incident had on Angelou's psychological health as an example of the complexities women experienced during that period.

Sexual violence, as Collins mentions, threatened black women in addition to the violence that permeated because of the differences created by “historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, skin color, or ethnicity” (2000, p.26). Little girls who were victimized by racism, poverty, and misogyny had that awareness that they were “vulnerable to rape as a form of sexual violence” (p.26). Collins explains that particular acts of sexual violence visited on African-American women, such as rape, domestic abuse, or incest, “reflect a broader process by which violence is socially constructed in a race- and gender-specific manner” (pp.146-147). Those women, according to Collins, are twice victimized. First, they were victimized by the actual rape, the collective rape under slavery, then were “victimized again by family members, community residents, and social institutions such as criminal justice systems which somehow believe that rape victims are responsible for their own victimization” (p. 147). Collins justifies continued silence concerning the second case of the victimization of Black women being raped by Black men. She argues that many Black men have internalized the controlling images associated with Black women, “shaped by the historical legacy of pornography,

prostitution, and the institutionalized rape of Black women that have contributed to the broader social context affecting all African-Americans reside (p.148). Maya's family supported her, and Mr. Freeman was arrested, brought to court, and received a light sentence of one day, but later that night, he was found violently beaten to death.

After that sexual abuse and the murder of Mr. Freeman, Maya, the little girl, decided to "use silence as a retreat," feeling guilty for ending a man's life. She thought of "poor Mr. Freeman and the guilt which lined [her] heart, even after all those years, was a nagging passenger in [her] mind" (Angelou, 2015, pp.246- 247). Traumatized, Maya lapsed into a prolonged silence for five years and stopped talking to people other than her brother Bailey. As Dimitrijević believes, "silence that follows trauma is never natural, but it can be a consequence of an action— silencing" (2020, p. 211). He explains that victims struggle consciously or unconsciously to make articulating the narrative of their trauma impossible. He adds that the traumatized person "will take the blame and start splitting" (p.212). Thus, young Marguerite was split by the guilt because her testimony had caused Mr. Freeman's conviction and death. She was simultaneously ashamed of herself because she had enjoyed some of his foreplay. Therefore, she muted herself to avoid articulating the whole traumatic scene that she could neither escape nor forgive herself.

Confronting racism and sexism, Angelou showed many acts of resistance that eventually led to her personal growth. When she was eight, she provided her statement at the court, although she was deeply intimidated by the whole trial. In addition, she expressed her defiance through the pursuit of education and her love for literature. In her eighth-grade graduation ceremony in 1940, though frustrated by the speech of the white speaker, she felt proud of herself and her people. Henry Reed, the class valedictorian, shivered the air singing the Negro national anthem with the rest of the students singing with him. Angelou describes that exceptional scene, recalling the songs and tales of their great poets, saying,

We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. Their depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud grounding class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Nigro race. (Angelou, 2015, p.182)

At age fifteen, defying the sexist hiring policies, she managed to secure a position as the first female Black conductor abroad on a San Francisco streetcar. At sixteen, she got her high school diploma, feeling confident and happy with her baby, the 'beautiful possession,' "the pretty golden baby" (p.283-284). Motherhood was a blessing amidst that troubled life.

Furthermore, the community is another factor that helped Angelou to overcome her trauma and resist injustice against Black people. Her vivid portrayal of the tight-knit Black community in Stamps, Arkansas, and the bonds of kinship and support that sustained her during her most challenging moments provide evidence of the transformative power of collective resilience. U.S. Black women, according to Collins, constructed their individual and collective voices supported by their relationships with one another as mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends. Collins adds that the "mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women" (2000, p.102). Collins stressed that Black daughters identified their mothers' profound influence on their lives with mothers and mother figures emerging as central figures in autobiographies such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and others (p. 102).

One striking example of community and solidarity is the role of Angelou's grandmother, Annie Henderson, as the beacon of strength and stability in the face of adversity to those around her. Angelou's respect for her grandmother's love, wisdom, and commitment to the well-being of her family and community is a testament to the profound impact that strong family bonds can have on an individual's development and sense of self-worth. Her admiration for her grandmother, whom she calls Momma, is visible in these lines describing her: "Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths of life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones" (Angelou, 2015, p.46). Being raised by her strong Grandmother, who compensated her for the loss of her parents, empowered her to give voice to Black people like Annie, who used to provide strength to her family and society in the face of inequity.

Moreover, Angelou's journey of self-discovery and healing was deeply intertwined with the support and guidance she received from the women in her community, including her grandmother, mother, and Mrs. Flowers, who nurtured her intellectual curiosity. Those resilient female figures shaped her worldview and empowered her to overcome the trauma she had endured. Collins emphasizes the role of community and collective experiences in shaping Black women's experiences. She points out that community empowers them to define their identities and realities on their own terms. When their very survival is at stake, as Collins elaborates, they create independent self-definitions, which become essential to their survival (2000, p.112). Angelou's Momma introduced her to Mrs. Flowers, the educated teacher who helped her regain her voice and confidence by giving her that lifeline of healing through reading poetry and literature. In addition, the Black community also showed examples of unity when they confronted and resisted the oppressive forces that threatened their well-being. Angelou's recounting of the community's response to the arrival of the white racist organization of the Klan, which threatened the Black communities, and the Blacks' strategies to protect their homes and families exemplified the power of solidarity in the face of adversity. Her eighth-grade graduation class showed them united against the racist speech of the speaker, singing proudly the national anthem of the Negroes and recalling the songs of their great people. She wrote about the allegiances she owed at her high school, "Momma with her solemn determination, Mrs. Flowers and her books, Bailey with his love, my mother and her gaiety, Miss Kerwin and her infer information, my evening classes of drama and dance" (Angelou, 2015, p.214). They were of great support during her traumatic experience.

The painful experiences she endured throughout her childhood shaped her self-recognition. The summer she spent with her father when she was fifteen shaped her new consciousness of moving into adulthood. She says, "I reasoned that I had given up some youth for knowledge, but my gain was more valuable than the loss" (Angelou, 2015, p. 251). When she fought with Dolores, her father's girlfriend, she ran away, sleeping in a car in a junkyard where she met a group of diverse homeless teenagers with whom she felt as if newly born, not belonging to the Negro race, but the race of all humanity. That experience boosted her sense of freedom, like "a loose kite in a gentle wind floating with only my will for an anchor" (p.247). She elaborates, saying:

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 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. (p. 250)

With the junkyard community, Maya learned to appreciate diversity and tolerance, a lesson that will influence the rest of her life. She returned to her mother in San Francisco more self-confident and self-assured, rushing headlong into the larger world.

In addition to the previous factors that helped Angelou overcome the difficulties she experienced, her writing and the narration of her own stories also contributed hugely to her healing journey. Angelou's memoir illustrates her capacity for self-expression and how she uses her voice as a tool of resistance and empowerment, asserting her rightful place in the world. This aligns with Patricia Collins' perspective, which emphasizes the importance of self-definition for marginalized individuals, such as Black women. That new consciousness of self-definition and valuation fueled Angelou's personal empowerment. Collins explains that if an individual Black woman is forced to remain "motionless on the outside," [she] can develop the "inside" of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. Becoming personally empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one's ability to act, is essential" (Collins, 2000, p. 118). Collins adds that "the power to save the self lies within the self [...] the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself" (p.118-119). Collins stresses that the "individual woman may use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice" (p.119). To challenge social narratives that seek to diminish their worth, Angelou used her writing to seek power that helped her reclaim her identity.

Recalling the poem "Sympathy" by the great African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), Angelou employs the 'caged bird' as the controlling metaphor of the memoir, a powerful symbol of the limitations, confinement, and silencing that Angelou experienced due to the intersecting forces of race and gender. In addition, this recurring image of the caged bird evokes Angelou's feelings of entrapment, suppressed freedom, and social constraints. However, the metaphor also signifies Angelou's invincible spirit and her determination to break free from the confines of her cage through the tools of self-expression and resistance. By framing her experiences through the lens of her own narrative, Angelou embodies Collins' notion of self-definition, transforming her pain into a source of strength and resilience. In doing so, she empowers herself and invites others to recognize the transformative power of their own stories, reinforcing the necessity of claiming one's voice in pursuing liberation.

In 1983, Angelou gave another voice to her caged bird in her famous poem "Caged Bird," where she compares the free bird with the caged one. While the free bird thinks of the breeze, trees, bright lawns, and the sky, the caged bird, as she says,

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. (Angelou, 1994, p.191)

Angelou voices her own suffering; though once she was crippled by traumatic memories and struggles with race and gender complexities, she did not submit tamely to that cage with its chains and bars. She fought to have her voice and experience articulated in a journey of self-knowledge, exploration, and inspiration.

By giving voice to her traumatic experiences, from racial discrimination to sexual assault, Angelou's memoir becomes an act of liberation, healing, and reclamation, a voice that supports others' freedom. In one of her interviews, she said: "I support the women's liberation movement. Because I am for every person, or groups of people, who intend to make it a better country for everybody, a better world for everybody" (The Black Scholar, 1977, p. 52). Her honesty and poetic self-narration allow her to transcend the cages constructed by systemic oppression. In this way, the caged bird metaphor represents not only Angelou's oppression but also her journey toward healing, empowerment, and, ultimately, freedom. Angelou's 'singing,' her literary voice and artistic expression, is a powerful mechanism for delivering her message to the world. Once, her teacher, Mrs. Flowers, told her that "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper

meaning" (Angelou, 2015, p.96). Thus, acquiring a voice through writing and breaking the silence with language helped her to be heard, emerging as a formidable character surviving the tripartite crossfire of hate and prejudices and the Black lack of power. As a Black woman writer, these words expressed her ability to "define herself as worthwhile," touching that Black women's community that "heals the member in pain, but only after she has taken the first step of wanting to be healed, of wanting to make the journey toward finding the voice of empowerment" (Collins, p.119).

As Bloom considers this memoir Angelou's best book, he believes that "Angelou achieves an almost unique tone that blends intimacy and detachment, a tone indeed of assured serenity that transcends the fearful humiliations and outrages that she suffered as a girl," inspiring thousands of readers with "an implicit image of the resurrection of their own innermost self, a fragment of divinity that transcended natural birth, and so can never die" (2009, p.2). Henceforth, her memoir stands as a testament to the transformative potential of resistance, as Angelou's reclamation of her narrative becomes a means of shattering the silence imposed upon marginalized individuals. In addition, the significance of the caged bird metaphor lies in its ability to portray the complex lived realities of Black women while also providing a symbol of hope, resilience, and the human spirit's capacity to overcome even the most formidable cages. Through this metaphor, Angelou's memoir becomes a powerful call for self-determination, self-expression, and collective solidarity in the ongoing struggle against intersectional oppression.

5. Conclusion

In her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou powerfully depicts the complexities of being a Black woman in a racist and patriarchal society, highlighting the intersectional challenges she faced due to the overlapping of race and gender. The analysis reveals how Angelou's acts of defiance, from her pursuit of education to her refusal to remain silent about her life struggles, served as critical forms of resistance that facilitated her personal growth, empowerment, and ultimate liberation. Her memoir underscores the importance of self-determination, self-expression, and community solidarity in the struggle against oppression and her traumatic journey of self-healing and discovery. This is encapsulated in her central metaphor, the 'caged bird,' which not only represents the intersectional oppression Angelou faced as a Black woman but also symbolizes her indomitable spirit and determination to break free from the chains of systemic injustice. With her vivid storytelling, Angelou's memoir stands as a powerful call for self-determination and the human spirit's capacity to overcome even the most formidable cages of oppression. Her journey toward healing and freedom, as depicted in her powerful prose, inspires marginalized individuals to find their own voice and shatter the silence imposed upon them. In her forties, Angelou decided that the time had come to heal herself by sharing her story, her pain and trauma, with others. In this memoir, she not only wrote herself but also rewrote the history of her strong race and her fellow Black women whose love and solidarity saved her and helped her overcome her trauma.

Although the study has revealed aspects of Angelou's inspiring journey of Angelou as depicted in her first memoir, the study is limited to this book, the first of her seven-part memoir. Therefore, a comparative analysis of Angelou's memoir with her subsequent works and other works of Black female writers could provide valuable insights into Black women's shared struggles and strategies of resistance across different historical and geographical contexts. Maya Angelou's bird is still singing her melodies of freedom echoing in the souls of women worldwide, the women of promise who defy the odds, to whom she dedicated her memoir, inspiring them to release their own songs and stories and breaking their chains. Those women can create and enjoy their private personal spheres of consciousness and freedom empowered through knowledge and explorations as Maya Angelou did when she broke that cage, flying to the 1993 William Jefferson Clinton Inauguration with her grand theatrical performance of her memorable poem, "On the Pulse of Morning" singing not for herself or her Black race, but for the dreams, and the new beginning of the whole nation, and inviting people to imagine and work for a better future for the country.

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