



Perspectives of Social Alienation and the Impact of Identity Formation in Marginalized Childhoods in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: An Analysis

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Abstract

The focus of this research paper is on African-American literature, highlighting its significance in grasping the complexities of race in America. It highlights the efforts of African-American female writers in their battle against the injustices perpetuated by the white community, especially in the Southern states. The Harlem Renaissance offered Black intellectuals a platform to communicate their perspectives and challenge social inequalities. In India and the West Indies, social class plays a significant role, whereas in America, the primary divisions are determined by skin color. Providing education to children is the most effective means of achieving societal progress. It highlights the difficult experiences of children who frequently face neglect or abuse. They encounter challenges such as struggling to survive, experiencing insecurity, suffering from harm, lacking educational opportunities, and receiving inadequate support from their parents. These problems are related to the broader context of racial segregation and inequitable treatment. The research highlights Maya Angelou alongside Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston in their portrayal of Black experiences. She conveys the different sensations of being an outsider, reflecting on her experiences from childhood to her early adult years. "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" narrates a heartfelt yet truthful account of the experiences of a black individual in America facing frequent injustice while growing up.

Keywords: Marginalization, social exclusion, racial segregation, discrimination, black women writers, Harlem renaissance, childhood inequality, racial prejudice, social injustice.

Introduction

African-American literature reveals the ways in which storytelling and artistic expression can affect racial dynamics in the United States. In the South, African-American women expressed their thoughts on the inequitable laws established by white people, highlighting the numerous challenges faced by Black individuals. The efforts of community writers, artists, and activists contributed significantly to the amplification of strength and voice among Black people. The Harlem Renaissance provided a platform for Black intellectuals to express their thoughts, fostering unity among African Americans that confronted the societal divisions imposed by the nation. In India and the West Indies, people are often divided by social class. In America, divisions are mainly based on skin color. African-Americans realized that legislation and government support alone would not fully resolve society's issues. They were convinced that teaching young people was the key to reducing inequality. This study explores not only the obstacles linked to typical African-American experiences but also the general struggles faced by underprivileged children. These challenges involve staying safe, facing problems like sexual assault and violence, limited educational opportunities, and ineffective parenting. The

statement also highlights that the organization of African-American neighbourhoods complicates life for disadvantaged youth, primarily due to factors like racial division and unjust treatment.

As a prominent figure in the African-American community, Maya Angelou made her mark as a writer, poet, and advocate for civil rights. She is frequently called the "poet laureate for black women". She became the first African-American woman to hold the position of conductor within a cable car system. Angelou gained recognition and acclaim for her seven autobiographical works. In 1969, she released her debut autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which marked the beginning of her writing journey. It was well-received by both the public and critics. Inspired by her success, she went ahead to author six more autobiographies while also diving into poetry, screenplay writing, acting in movies, and participating in numerous other creative initiatives. Through her writing and artistic endeavors that challenged racial discrimination, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, a top honor for civilians. The first book she authored, titled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, delves into the hardships of her early life and the ways in which racism impacted the African-American community.

Maya Angelou's autobiography "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*," published in 1969, is her life story. It describes her experiences growing up in the Southern United States during the 1930s and highlights the challenges African Americans faced at that time. This motivating autobiography narrates Maya Angelou's journey as she navigated the difficulties faced by African Americans in education, politics, economic prospects, and personal safety during her upbringing. A largely white American society enhances its control by restricting the freedoms of Black Americans and slowly revising laws to hinder the development of the African American community.

The memoir "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" opens with the depiction of Maya Angelou's parents' unhappy and financially unstable marriage. Thus, Maya, aged three, and her brother Bailey, who is four, relocate to their grandmother Momma's home in the small town of Stamps, Arkansas. The severe racism and unjust treatment of black and white people in Stamps present considerable obstacles for Maya and the members of her community. The frequent exclusion Maya experiences leads her to struggle with societal judgments, influencing her growth and self-image. Maya, who had little money and was not fond of the actions of certain individuals in the African American community, still held a deep love for her community. At the age of seven, Maya was taken aback by the unexpected visit from her parents, Vivian and Bailey Johnson. Living in San Francisco, Maya found herself under the influence of her trendy mom, Vivian, who enjoys a leisurely existence. Freeman caused Maya significant harm when she was just eight years old. Following the death of her mother's boyfriend, Freeman, she became silent for several years.

On the other hand, life in California with her dad became really difficult, and Maya chose to leave and live with homeless teenagers in a junkyard. When she was fifteen, Maya stood up against unfair treatment based on race that affected job chances for many African American women. She made history by becoming the first African American woman to work as a conductor on San Francisco streetcars. Later, Maya has a brief sexual relationship that results in her becoming pregnant. After she finishes high school, she has a son. Maya Angelou's book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, finishes with Maya being an unemployed young mom living in California. This story continues in her next book, *Gather Together in My Name*, which was published in 1974.

The notion of marginalization in children's lives is not comparable to the deep pain some individuals confront in society. Instead, it functions within a cycle that perpetuates discrimination across generations, allowing one group to remain in control of another. The strongest group in society typically utilizes fear tactics or pressure to address disagreements. They are unwilling to address problems concerning race, ethnicity, social class, or gender that impact other marginalized communities. The difficulties that a marginalized man confronts are not the same as those that a marginalized experiences. The reason is that the stereotypes created by society are passed down to future generations. These stereotypes give a sense of power to the adults, who teach these ideas to the children, who are the next generation.

Even at a tender age, children within the African American community start to face racial conflicts between Black and White people. Maya Angelou examines the intricate struggles that children from less affluent backgrounds face in managing social class distinctions. The hardships encountered by African American children result in considerable suffering,

both physically and emotionally. The tough conditions that African American children encounter create barriers to their participation in society, especially regarding educational opportunities. A lot of black children frequently relocate, causing some individuals to perceive them as immigrants who contribute little to the nation's development. The injustices of the social system are mirrored in the behavior of the white children. They play a role in the abuse of Black children and at times exhibit disrespect for older individuals within the Black community. Discrimination influences white children to regard black children as not as valuable. Black kids have dubbed the white kids on Momma's farm as "poor white trash." Maya Angelou expresses her frustration over the disparity in how white children receive preferential treatment compared to Black elders. She experiences a sense of helplessness regarding the sway of white children.

Maya wanted to be white because of the negative feelings from society about being black. At first, she didn't like her skin color, but later she started to appreciate and love her own culture. Maya Angelou's views on having black skin. Maya believes that if she becomes a white girl, she will be beautiful and get the same admiration and respect as the other white girls in Arkansas. Children who are marginalized constitute a particular segment of the population that tends to be disregarded and often lacks access to vital social, political, economic, and cultural support. This is a significant problem that impacts them from an early age. These children frequently lack the opportunities and respect that society grants to others. The extra benefits for disadvantaged children change with new laws, which often raises questions because these changes are frequent and can create confusion instead of helping improve their well-being.

The complicated social rules focus more on a child's race, background, and goals instead of how they act and their values. Slavery and its unfair treatment ended after the 13th Amendment in the United States in 1865. The 14th Amendment later gave equal rights to all citizens, and the 15th Amendment, passed in 1870, ensured everyone had the right to vote. Still, white people continued to be in control in society, jobs, and politics from one generation to the next, and no laws changed the low status of the African American community. As a result, the lives of black children in South America are very difficult. They face challenges like people not trusting them, and their future looks uncertain because of issues like moving to other places, families breaking apart, and problems with parenting. The many experiences of racial discrimination in their daily life impact the growth and development of marginalized children in all areas of their personality.

In eighth grade, Maya encountered a difficult situation due to two painful cavities that caused her significant discomfort. To ease the pain, she and her grandmother, whom she called Momma, visited a local white dentist named Lincoln, who owed Momma a favor. The dentist, despite owing her a favor, declined to aid Maya because she was Black. He had a racist rule that he wouldn't help people of color. When Momma tried to talk to him, he hurt her feelings by using mean words. He said he'd rather put his hand in a dog's mouth than in a Black person's. And when Momma further argued over the dentist, he ridicules in an abusive manner, saying, "I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" and insists "raising your voice won't make me change my mind". (203) He also told her that shouting wouldn't make him change his mind. Maya Angelou demonstrated through this difficult experience that just speaking up is not enough to change

deep-seated racist beliefs. She thought that true change could only happen by helping the overlooked community grow and improve.

Maya Angelou came from a well-known group of people who were often treated unfairly because of their race in the Western world. She talked about how hard it is for African American kids by sharing her own life. She lived in a junkyard in Southern California, surrounded by old cars, with other homeless teenagers. She thought of the junkyard as a big ocean, her car as an island, and even though she was all alone, she still felt warm and hopeful inside. Maya noticed that the African American community was treated unfairly when she went to George Washington High School in San Francisco. The white children in that area had a larger vocabulary, whereas the Black children from the South faced challenges with language and were frequently neglected. Maya had trouble feeling like she belonged and felt uneasy walking in white neighbourhoods. Every time the streetcar went through her Black neighborhood, she felt a mix of feelings that showed how uncomfortable she was and how she noticed the separation between the different communities.

The marginalization of African American communities significantly affects their children's well-being and development. They face many problems like child labor, moving around a lot, unfair treatment of resources, not having jobs, sexual abuse, feeling unsafe, and living in poverty. When talking about these social problems, it's important to consider them from a sociological perspective, particularly Marxism. Marxist theory says that in a capitalist society, it is inevitable that poor and working-class people will be taken advantage of. Maya Angelou talks about the hard lives of working-class people. She points out that they are often treated poorly and feel embarrassed to admit how difficult their lives really are. Marxism helped create race conflict theory, which is an important part of social conflict theory. This idea is about fighting for fairness for all races and stopping unfair treatment, especially in a country like the United States, where inequality has a long history.

Issues like poverty, child labor, unemployment, moving from one place to another, and unfair treatment are all linked and often happen together for disadvantaged people in the African American community. From a Marxist view, these problems are caused by strong social inequality. It means that one group in society, usually white people, can only be rich if another group, often Black people, stays poor. In her book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou talks about the differences between rich and poor people, those in charge and those who aren't, bosses and workers, and people who dress nicely and those who wear old clothes. She clearly shows the unfair treatment and inequalities that exist between Black and white communities. Maya Angelou's in her *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* reveals the social inequality between the two communities as "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" (27).

The bond among children from disadvantaged backgrounds relies on their family ties and the relationships they have in their community. Because of migration, these children often don't get the good parenting and guidance they need, which is very important for their growth during childhood. The affection and emotions these children have for their families are influenced by a dysfunctional family environment.

Maya Angelou's family was complicated and her parents often argued, which really affected how she and her brother Bailey felt. She says to Bailey that "I couldn't believe that our

mother would laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children" (56). Maya believed that her parents do not belong to the environment where she belongs and feels completely strange to live with them declaring that, "He was a stranger, and if he chose to leave us with a stranger, it was all of one piece" (65). Child sexual abuse and exploitation are seen as serious problems that affect vulnerable children. These issues are among the worst parts of their difficult situations. Getting pregnant early is an important reason why some girls are treated unfairly, which stops them from enjoying their childhood. When Maya Angelou was eight years old, she went through a very painful experience when her mother's boyfriend, Froc, hurt her badly. she wens a traumatic experience of being brutally raped by her mother's boyfriend named Froc this physical and psychological distressing "act of rape on an eight-year-old body made the mute for several years, drastically affecting her childhood days". (84). Maya Angelou this brutal experience as, "My legs throbbed, or rather the inside of my thighs throbbed the same force that Mr. Freeman's heart had beaten". (85) The group of Children who are often left out relies on their family ties and friendships in their community. Because of migration, these children often lack good parenting and care, which is really important for their growth during childhood. The emotional development of love and care that these children feel for their families and relatives is blocked by an unsuitable family situation.

Historical events of social exclusion significantly impact individuals or groups, influenced by the prevailing beliefs and values within a nation. A group of white American men established the Jim Crow laws to maintain the dominance of white individuals in society. These laws directly and indirectly pushed African Americans to the side by limiting their chances in politics, jobs, and social life, especially for black people in the South. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended the Jim Crow laws, and the New Negro Movement in the 1920s helped people understand the racial problems in American society better. Even though many good laws have been made, social events often get bad attention. The hopes of the African American community, who often face challenges, focus on changing America from a place with racism to one without it.

In the same way, the overlooked characters in Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, like Maya, Bailey, Momma, Vivian, Daddy Bailey, and Uncle Willie, work hard to help their community in their own ways. Momma deals with the unfair treatment from white Americans by trying to stay away from them. Maya's parents, especially Bailey, pretend to be okay to handle their struggles. Vivian, who is mixed race, is free to chase her dream of a glamorous career. The wrong actions of white people led to Bailey's rebellion as a teenager, and Uncle Willie thought that keeping order would help improve the future for the black community. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) show the deep pain and shame experienced by children who are often overlooked or mistreated. The terrible abuse of Celie by her father, Alphonso, and the killing of her baby by Sethe, who is *Beloved*'s mother, show the deep struggles that children who are marginalized face within their own families.

In his autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), Richard Wright illustrates the resilience of children confronting racism and segregation in the Northern United States. Maya Angelou really cared about education and loved books and writing. This not only made her well-known but also made her

community feel proud. Flowers shows Maya how powerful spoken words can be. Maya Angelou's love for reading teaches her important lessons about life, with stories like Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the poem *Beowulf* helping her to learn and understand more. Mrs. Flowers introduces the power of spoken words to Maya Angelou by saying that the words are beautiful on the page but powerful when spoken aloud. Mrs. Flowers appeals to Maya like "women in English novels who walked the moors with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance and Maya admires her by saying that "she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself". (103) The elevation of the marginalized black children lies in their academic achievement and word power because "words mean more than what is set down on paper". (106) Maya serves as an ideal figure in elevating the marginalized identity of black Americans using the source of education, arts, and various forms of literary expression. Maya's commitment to "evening classes of drama and dance" (233) Maya realizes how important education is, which helps her feel good about herself and gives her the confidence to finish school. The Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s was a key time for African Americans to express their views on society. The Harlem Renaissance created job opportunities for black Americans, allowing Maya to win a scholarship. She remembers, "When I was fourteen, I got a scholarship and got one for the next year as well" (232).

The nuanced social expectations emphasize a child's race, heritage, and ambitions rather than their actions and ethical beliefs. The passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865 marked the end of slavery and discriminatory practices in the United States. By establishing equal rights for all citizens, the 14th Amendment complemented the 15th Amendment, which was ratified in 1870 to guarantee that everyone could vote. Still, white people stayed in control of society, jobs, and politics for many years, and no laws could improve the lower status of African Americans. As a result, the lives of black children in South America are difficult and often looked at with doubt. Their future doesn't seem bright because of issues like moving to new places, families breaking apart, and problems with parenting. The numerous encounters with racial bias that marginalized children face in their everyday lives influence various aspects of their personality development.

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