

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Challenging Stereotypes: A Study of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract:

*Autobiographical acts often are attempts at visibility. The autobiographical works of African American women arise from their socio-historical positions as blacks and females and embody their attempts to gain acceptability. Such works are important documents that serve the socio-political purposes of dispelling common negative images. The present paper concerns itself with how Maya Angelou's first volume of autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) rejects a prominent stereotyping of black women—that of the 'matriarch' and how it presents them as constituting a unique fraternity called 'black womanhood.'*

Keywords: Black, female, stereotype, matriarch, black womanhood

1. Introduction

- As black American women, we are born into a mystic sisterhood, and we live our lives within a magic circle, a realm of shared language, reference, and allusion within the veil of our blackness and femaleness. We have been as invisible to the dominant culture as rain; we have been knowers, but we have not been known. This paradox is central to what I suggest we call the Afra-American experience (Braxton 1).

Joanne M. Braxton, here, very succinctly encapsulates the position of the African American woman as black and female. Blackness and femaleness combine to form a thick veil permitting her to see through it but obstructing others from seeing her—the black but female and the female but black individual behind the veil. While blackness in itself has the potential to relegate a section of the people to a marginalized status and hence render them invisible, invisibility for the African American woman has additional dimensions. Indeed, for her what Braxton calls “dominant culture” includes not only the hegemonic white male society but the sub-hegemonic black male and white female societies. And this is the ‘paradox’ that defines her life—she finds herself in opposition to even those with whom she shares affinities. Her black male counterparts alienate her on the basis of gender while her white female counterparts do so on the basis of colour.

2. Aims and Objectives

Denigration and forced silence, then, are a common lot for black women. But, as is always the case in history, this very suppression of voice, of identity has helped to sow the seeds of resistance. There are instances when they have spoken up and made attempts at visibility. And in paving their ways into history, autobiographical writings have played a crucial part. Black women have used the genre to challenge racist and sexist ideologies. Autobiographical writings, thus, are attempts at owning what Braxton calls “her words, her freedom, and most assuredly her own image” (Braxton 2). I, here, focus on how the autobiographical works of black women serve the political purpose of putting forward their otherwise unheard stories. This paper thus would examine how such works reject negative stereotypes and project a very different picture of black women. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* would be primarily dealt with.

Autobiographies of marginalized people serve as important documents in that they embody the struggle to find a voice and thereby depict events and instances of socio-historical significance. Scholars of autobiography have often commented on the importance of the genre's reliance on non-fictional elements. Johnnie M. Stover has pointed out how as “creative non-fiction” history is always present in autobiographies. Any study of the genre, therefore, cannot help focusing on the historical aspects, though one has to accept the literary and aesthetic merits as well. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the aesthetic aspects of the texts taken up. Rather as aforesaid the basic concern is to study how the writers, themselves black women, understand and present ‘black womanhood,’ thereby rejecting prevalent stereotypical images.

Talking about stereotypes, it is important to note that in case of black women such negative images are many, so much so that it is only too normative to describe them in terms of matriarchs, mammies, welfare mothers, jezebels etc. These dominant images, needless to say, serve to perpetuate the association of derogatoriness with blackness. But the sad irony of the situation is that it is not whites alone who uphold these views, black males join the ‘blame game’—hence very tacitly the black woman is projected as the reason for

African American 'inferiority.' To attempt a detailed discussion of these things would be to attempt transcending the limits of this paper. I would therefore confine myself to one particular stereotype—that of the 'matriarch' and then go about illustrating how *Caged Bird* rejects the image. Angelou's autobiographical text would be shown to reveal the existence of a distinctive black feminine sensibility. As a corollary to the proposed objectives this paper would also look at how the studied text substantiates the proposition of black feminist scholars that their feminist thought is constituted of the everyday knowledge systems of ordinary black women—*Caged Bird* would thus be read as being both defined by and defining black feminist thought.

3. The Matriarch Thesis

One of the most distinguishing features of the black feminist struggle is to reject the negative images of black womanhood and expose the ideological underpinnings of stereotypical images imposed on black women. Black feminist Patricia Collins mentions how the dominant ideology serves to subordinate African American women in a Eurocentric and male centered America.

- Within U.S. culture racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such an extent that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context certain assumed qualities that are attached to black women are used to justify oppression . . . negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to black women's oppression (Collins 5).

Thus they expose how stereotypical images are not actually verifiable but are ideological devices to denigrate black women and keep them in subordinated positions. One such stereotype that black feminists like Collins try to dispel is that of the 'matriarch'. Collins highlights how the 'matriarch' thesis serves as a covert device to substantiate ideas of black inferiority. By presenting black women as strong and as lacking traditional notions of femininity, the dominant ideology suggests that these women ignore mothering duties,

- [P]ortraying African American women as matriarchs allows white men and women to blame black women for their children's failure in schools and with the law as well as black children's subsequent poverty (Collins 77)

The failures of black children are hence very tacitly passed on to their faulty upbringing. Making black mothers responsible for the downtrodden state of U.S. blacks serves to swerve responsibility from the actual socio-political reasons. Moreover, it also functions as an effective policy to place the black man and woman in antagonistic terms. It alleges that black women by their aggressiveness and independence emasculate the black men. The matriarch thesis, then, influences the black man's view of his masculinity. He starts idealizing white women, rejecting his black counterparts as over-assertive and therefore, deterrent to his maleness.

Black feminist theorists, thus, show how by using the seeming absence of black patriarchy as reason for black inferiority the focus is shifted from socio-political causes to the cultural deviance from white standards. They advocate the need of understanding the presence of black working women as not the cause but the result of economic disadvantage. Exposing the matriarch thesis as an ideological policy, they go about challenging it. Exploring how black women construct their realities is one consistent concern in black feminist thought.

4. Study of *Caged Bird*

The autobiography under examination counters the stereotyping of black mothers as matriarchs. The Afro American mother emerges as one who can be both affectionate and strong. Angelou shows how portraying nourishing qualities as separate and opposed to strength is one way to alienate the black mother from dominant discourses of motherhood. The mother figure that we come across in the text, in a way, redefines the whole concept of motherhood. In *Caged Bird* we have Annie Henderson—strong, economically independent, yet also nurturing her grandchildren with her love and lessons. Angelou recalls as to how she owned the only Negro general store in Stamps, Arkansas. Her business acumen is made evident when the autobiographer relates as to how she gradually moved upwards to being the owner of a store:

- Early in the century, Momma . . . sold lunches to the saw men in the lumberyard (east Stamps) and the seed man at the cotton gin (west Stamps). Her crisp meat pies and cool lemonade, when joined to her miraculous ability to be in two places at the same time, assured her business success. From being a mobile lunch counter, she set up a stand between the two points of fiscal interest and supplied the workers' needs for a few years. Then she had the Store built in the heart of the Negro area (Angelou 6).

This bit of information is significant in that here Annie Henderson emerges in the role of the 'matriarch'. It is important to note here that at the time that is being referred to (white) women were still expected to play the "lady in the house". Hence the figure of a woman owning and heading a business (even if it's only a small store) provides a sharp antithesis to the accepted image of womanhood. Angelou's narrative however subverts that very contrast by showing how the matriarch image need not necessarily clash with that of the (accepted notion of) mother. The autobiographer's "Momma" embodies the black woman's merging of the private and the public sphere. Though entrusted with the responsibility of fending for the family she also carries on the typical womanly duties of caring for the children and indoctrinating them with values and principles.

- "Though shall not be dirty" and "Though shall not be impudent" were the two commandments of Grandmother Henderson upon which hung our total salvation" (27).

She creates a moral order in which she tries to cocoon her children. And there are numerous instances in her autobiography when Angelou associates motherly protection with Annie Henderson. Living in racially divided Stamps, it was natural that they had had to face certain harsh facts of life early in life. It is with "Momma's" support that they survive the brutality of the environment they find themselves in. There are references to the love she felt for and felt from her grandmother.

Angelou's autobiography then serves the socio political purpose of countering the image fostered by the white society for its purpose. The autobiographer by celebrating the strength of her grandmother who skillfully combines mothering duties with work outside the

family sphere subverts the matriarch thesis. Angelou thus performs the black feminist's desire of putting up a picture of black life as it is, and not as the white society depicts it.

Annie Henderson, then, serves as the archetypal mother figure in black women's autobiographies—"rural in identification and origin, if not always in current location; immersed in folk communities; deeply religious; and the privileged custodian of the values . . . of their people" (Gates 185). For the black community religion has been a means of survival amidst the miserable conditions of life. "Momma" embodies that spirit of the community. Her religiosity serves as her justification for the tolerance she exhibits towards her oppressors. Like her comrades she believes in a divine power that would one day magically change the order of the world. Profoundly religious she passes on to her children the survival techniques that the black community has acquired over time. Angelou uses her autobiography to recollect how Annie Henderson had taught them to travel along the roads that the black community had deemed safe over the centuries, how she had said that whites "couldn't be spoken to insolently" (Angelou 47). This might appear at first to be a cowardly acquiescence but the writer knows that this apparently subservient stance was only a "practical" (Angelou 47) step to ensure survival.

Caged Bird in "Momma" (as in the other women referred to) presents the complex beings that black women are. If Angelou shows her grandmother's practicality, she also celebrates her strength, her capacity to maintain dignity even as she adheres to recognized patterns of etiquette between whites and blacks. If Annie Henderson doesn't vehemently protest against her racist tormentors, she very clearly displays signs of subtle resistance. In the incidence where the "powhitetrash" girls subject her to glaring humiliation, she doesn't bow down. Indeed, Angelou depicts her firmness in a vivid image:

- She did an excellent job of sagging from her waist down, but from the waist up she seemed to be pulling for the top of the oak tree across the road (Angelou 30)

This image of "pulling for the top" suggests that the black woman retains her dignity. She keeps moaning her hymn—"Bread of Heaven, bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more" (Angelou 32)—notwithstanding all the attempts by the poor but White girls to mortify her. And despite the fact that after all the degradation she is subjected to, she has to respectfully bid adieu to her confounders (who as young Maya witnesses dare to address her with her first name), it is she who emerges as the victorious one. Angelou relates how her grandmother's face shone like a "brown moon" (Angelou 32-33). Though the child Maya fails to comprehend what makes Momma beautiful, readers of her autobiography immediately recognize Annie Henderson's battling while apparently surrendering as the source of her radiance.

Momma imparts to Maya the age old lessons passed on from one generation of Black women to the next, thus emphasizing the importance of the "oral tradition" in African American culture. Mrs. Flowers, the teacher Angelou admires, does the same thing: she encourages her to listen carefully to the homely sayings where was "couched the collective wisdom of generations." Joanne Braxton, in *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, asserts,

- For the black woman...there is a...realm of shared knowledge communicated from generation to generation, both through literature and the oral tradition. Education in black womanhood begins in infancy with lullabies, nursery rhymes, and children's games. This education intensifies during adolescence when older black women initiate younger ones in their secret recipes, sayings, and the ways and wisdom of holding a man (Braxton 5).

Here Braxton shows how a distinctive black feminine sensibility is formed. The young black woman is initiated into womanhood by her predecessors who pass on to her the knowledge system formed over time. For Maya too training in Black womanhood starts right from her childhood and as she points out it "was not the same" as those of White girls. Unlike the whites who were trained in grace and sophistication, Black girls were required to learn the things that would ensure self-sufficiency in the long run: they learned to embroider, to master the art of crocheting and tatting, to iron and wash. They acquired the "finer touches" too but those were learned "at the source of those habits" (Angelou 104)—the houses of the rich whites where they often had to work as maids. Angelou records her astonishment as a child at the meticulousness with which Mrs. Viola Cullinan, her employer's household operated—"the exactness of her house was inhuman". She thus sees herself in relation to the world of the 'white woman' and realizes the difference. The autobiographer notes the economic and social disparities that alienate the Afro American woman from her Euro American counterparts. But she does not exhibit any desire to emulate that world. Rather, like her literary progenitors Angelou uses the autobiographical genre to assert herself as a Black woman and to give voice to thousand others by exploring the unique fraternity called 'black womanhood.' Johnnie M. Stover in *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiographies* talks about how early in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* the autobiographer establishes the way black females engage in a silent woman to woman communication, expressing themselves beautifully without uttering anything significant:

- I raked the yellow-red dirt, and made half-moons carefully, so that the design stood out clearly and mask-like . . . Momma was admiring the yard, so I joined her. It truly looked like a flat redhead that had been raked with a big-toothed comb. Momma didn't say anything but I knew she liked it (Angelou 29).

Here we have an evidence of the communicative techniques that black women develop as a means of expression in a world that always tends to silence them. The "mask-like" design which both comprehends highlights how the black woman and her granddaughter enter the world of communication overcoming all restraints. Neither says anything but each understands the other. Indeed, woman to woman communication is important for women who have to depend on and relate to each other for their survival and fulfillment. Here, silence is loaded with meanings. For the African American woman, mute conversations served to veil what they were communicating from the outside world. Stover talks of how there is a distinctive African American women's way of using language as a means of communication. This "mother-tongue"—the name she gives to the series of communicative techniques—is necessitated by the black woman's special position as black and female. *Caged Bird* like many other autobiographies demonstrates the importance of this unique way of expressing that black women employ.

Angelou relates how the community of women in Stamps comes to the aid of each other. She recounts how as a child she observed them helping “Momma prepare the pork for sausage” (Angelou, 24). Her autobiography details every aspect of black women’s everyday lives. In this she shows the importance of taken for granted, common experience that black women share with each other and that constitutes the most fundamental knowledge of their lives. She thus shows how a distinctive black feminine sensibility exists. It is this knowledge that fosters black women’s radical thought.

Momma, Grandmother Baxter and Vivian Baxter do not fit in to the image of “true womanhood” propagated by Western culture till the middle of the twentieth century. In sharp contrast to white women whose duty consisted mainly in playing the role of “Lady in the house”, Black women had to fend for their families. Annie Henderson owned the only Negro general store; Grandmother Baxter was a woman having connections with the police and of whom even the whites were in awe; and Angelou can think of her mother, Vivian Baxter only in metaphors of “hurricane” and “storm”, thereby shattering the idea of meekness.

5. Conclusion

Caged Bird shows mothering duties and public life as complementary and not contradictory—in this it defies the matriarch thesis propagated by the white society and espoused by black men. The autobiographical text details the everyday issues of black women and hence dispels ‘fictionalized’ accounts regarding them and their lives. In her defiance of negative images and fostering of positive definitions, we see the writer as being influenced by and also influencing black feminist thought. This paper, thus, has established how the text subverts the racist and sexist ideologies surrounding black women.

6. References

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